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ABSTRACT

The Hmong are a distinct Asian people who, for thousands of years, dwelled in China, and then, more recently, in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Vietnam War caused thousands of Hmong to be displaced, and many came to the United States. This paper describes the decade-long resettlement of Hmong refugees in Decorah, a small town in Iowa. The history of the Hmong is told, and aspects of Hmong culture, including marriage and religion, are discussed. Efforts made by the Decorah Hmong to preserve their culture, and interactions between Hmong and long-time Decorah residents are examined. Much of the paper is a first-person narrative comprised of personal experiences with the Hmong as an English-as-a-Second-Language instructor, on extensive interviews with the Hmong, and on wide reading in anthropology and other social sciences. A lengthy list of references is included. (DB)

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# JOURNEYS, BOUNDARIES, MAPS, PATHS, AND PARADIGMS: THE DECORAH HMONG AND THE DECORAH NATIVE

By
Marilyn Miller Anderson

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A synthesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Degree
at Hamline University

November ~~1991~~ 1991

Synthesis supervisors: Professor Cynthia Cone
and Professor Anne DeMuth

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In memory of Nina Magnuson,
Mee Vue, Blia Yang Xiong, Ya Teng Lee, and Tong Lor

. . . . Barbara Spratt had come and gone--
come to help the new wives learn "life skills,"
until she thought she had more to learn than teach,
and her heart grew heavy in her chest.
Catherine Browder--The Clay That Breathes

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Special recognition to Jeanne Blake, who knows the Hmong and their language well, for correcting my path where ever she could and for being the scientist that I am not.

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## PROLOGUE

"If a map is accurate and you can read it, you won't get lost; if you know a culture, you will know your way around in the life of a society" (Kluckhohn, 1949, p. 28). Existence of a map presupposes a journey, one with side trips and explorations--challenging, exciting, vital, or threatening. It also presupposes that you can follow a given path. Although I first considered my journey with the Hmong " . . . . the paradigm journey to the paradigm elsewhere" (Geertz, 1988, p. 75), I came to realize that it was not so fixed a thing as a paradigm. There was no map of either culture which could always keep one from being lost. The world of the Decorah Hmong and the world of the Decorah native were both filled with multiplicity brought about by the diversity of our material environment and by the diversity of the winds of our hearts or, as the case may be, livers, but now in the wake of the Vietnam War we were bound to share this space and time. Hmong, however, have been accustomed to following paths without a map, to anticipating change in their environment and to forming the mental images necessary for coping with the world around them. They were sometimes willing to share these images through stories--much to a Decorah native's instruction and cultural broadening.

During my journey with the Hmong, I walked through the region between the Decorah culture and the Hmong culture in a landscape I had never known before; I soon came to realize that the journey of a Hmong refugee is not the journey of the refugee sponsor, nor vice versa; both journeys are ambiguous, neither is linear. Refugee and sponsor temporarily converge on peripheral cultural boundaries. Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist much concerned with the crosscultural study of myth, speaks about the importance of boundaries between people and those they study.

> I cannot fully enjoy the other, identify with him, and yet at the same time remain different. When integral communication with the other is achieved completely, it sooner or later spells doom for both his and my creativity. The great creative eras were those in which communication had become adequate for mutual stimulation by remote partners, yet was not so frequent or so rapid as to endanger the indispensable obstacles between individuals and groups or to reduce them to the point where overly facile exchanges might equalize and nullify their diversity (1985, P. 24).

Differences between the Hmong and the Decorah native continue. The Decorah Hmong have not assimilated with the Decorah Chamber of Commerce, the Nordic Fest Committee, or

the Decorah Ministerial Association nor has the Decorah native become Hmong. Consequently there is still good reason for study and exchange between us.

I did not know the meaning of the words "paradigm" or "Hmong" at the beginning of my intercultural journey but was bounded in my home town by church, school, and family and by the limestone bluffs and the winding Upper Iowa River. Decorah was not a town of extremes; one did not stay if one was very rich or very poor or very different from the English who first settled here or from the Norwegian or Irish who followed. The only people who came with any regularity from far away places were missionaries aligned with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, people who were allowed to live in the mission house on Leif Erikson Drive, but who were kept needy by their faith.

My friend Miriam and I scrapped ferociously as children, pulling braids and spitting, claiming to have visitors from England (or was it China?) as guests for dinner, probably someone lecturing at the college. Although jealous and competitive, we both longed for the exotic world beyond Decorah, but our chances for such diversity were limited. Few surprises of a foreign nature existed for us in our community.

However, when my mother invited Estonian refugees to live in the music room, she simply announced the fact to my

father and to the college boys (WW II vets, who occupied the room at the top of the stairs and the room at the end of the hall) so they wouldn't be shocked to find two more people sharing our bathroom. Mother became busy trying to guard the privacy of two Displaced Persons, who did not speak English, from three curious small children, six lanky GI's, and the neighbors.

Some weeks later the Estonians moved out of our home to work on my uncle's farm, notwithstanding the fact that they had been aristocrats from the city. We children were free to bang on the piano while mother again did her ironing in the music room which had served as a temporary home for the refugees. Later, although the Estonians moved to California, conscientiously sending annual Christmas greetings, my family began to repeat a story about the "DP's" stay at our house.

The story goes something like this--my father invited Arvie and his wife to join three generations of us for a Christmas celebration and, in the mean-time, instructed my mother to purchase a heavy, warm wool shirt as a gift for him. To my father that work shirt must have represented masculinity, the land, lumber, the railroad, friendship, warmth, and the Christmas spirit itself. After all, my father, a small town attorney, was raised on the legends of the American West. He was pleased with himself and his

generosity. On Christmas Eve when Arvie opened the red wool flannel shirt, he threw it to the floor and stormed out of the room in a fury, reminded of the Red Guard. This was "culture conflict," misunderstanding of one another's symbols, a jarring recognition of differences.

The other story regarding the Estonians was that when Arvie's wife was told by the doctor not to carry anything heavy because she was pregnant, she stopped carrying so much as a loaf of bread. An Iowa farm wife, used to holding up her end, doing her share, planting her feet firmly as she helped put in the crops, told this tale, and it appears to be one of the many myths told regarding the laziness of individuals in every wave of immigrants.

These European refugees were the last opportunity I had to learn first hand about another culture for the next quarter of a century--not an unusual kind of isolation for people raised in rural Iowa.

By the time the Hmong came to Decorah, I had been out of high school eighteen years and had nearly forgotten that I had put my head down on the cool wooden school desk and cried during senior free-reading hour over Tom Dooley, handsome and brave, trying to bring health to people in Southeast Asia, to Laos, to the Meo (Hmong).

In 1976 Northeast Iowa Technical Institute asked me to teach English to Southeast Asian refugees. At first I was a

reluctant traveler on the road to intercultural understanding, but later as a teacher and a sponsor a two-way process began. I instructed the Hmong to act in an "American way" and then they instructed me to act in a "Hmong way." None of us wanted to lose face. Before I left for a visit to Thailand in 1987, Kao, a Hmong friend, told me, "Trust the people I named for you, talk quiet, dress polite, and don't call attention to yourself." His instructions hint at much of what I had to learn about Hmong ethnicity.

# PART I INTRODUCTION

## History

'From time immemorial there has existed in China a race of people whose origin is unknown. Living continually on the mountains, apart from all other Asiatics, these people speak a distinctive language unknown to all those who live around them, and they wear a special costume that one never sees anywhere else.' These words, now very well known since they appear in almost every book on the Hmong people, are the opening words of F. M. Savina's classic, Histoire des Miao printed in Hong Kong by the Society of Foreign Missions, 1st edition in 1924, 2nd edition in 1930 (Savina, unpublished article and translation by Hasvold, 1979, p. 1 ).

However, just because the Hmong lived "apart from all others" and are "distinctive" in language and costume does not mean that they are a homogeneous group. Families vary from one another on the basis of the specific environment in which they have lived and the opportunities which have opened to them. Some Hmong are more intelligent; some are more educated; some are politically correct and some are

not; some have been able to obtain more of the world's goods than others. Most are determined to complete the journey of life as Hmong.

According to Savina (1924), to be Hmong is to take into account one's origins and to retell the story of Hmong history at all important "sacred events" including weddings and funerals. Someone in each family needs to be able to recite, along with many other stories that,

> The first Hmong lived at the other end . . . . They came to live later in China, in Honan; from Honan they went to Kweichow; from Kweichow they went to Szechwan; from Szechwan they went to Yunnan; from Yunnan they went to Tonkin; and from Tonkin to Laos (Savina, unpublished translation by Hasvold, 1979, p. 10).

Because the Hmong were not literate until recent times, men with good memories and narration skills were put in charge of the oral history, and although Savina only mentions men, I believe women took some part in this as they can become shaman and have a role in funeral preparations. Besides the list of places they had lived, the narrators included stories of creation, a great flood, and a fruit tree in a garden (all found in several versions--characteristic of oral tradition). They recounted the stories whenever sending brides to live with a new clan or sending the deceased to the Lord of Heaven.

When explaining his people's origins, one of the first Hmong men to resettle in Decorah told that the Hmong had at one time been very tall, blonde, and blue-eyed and that on occasion one could see blondes within the clans now. He didn't know why his people had changed so much but thought Chinese massacre of Hmong men and rape of Hmong women, besides subsistence on meager food over centuries, might account for changes in the Hmong coloring and stature. Keith Quincy (1988) in Hmong History of a People summarizes Savina's accounts of Caucasian features within the Hmong people and states, "While we can never know for sure whether most Hmong were once blond and blue-eyed, the predominance of Caucasoid features in present day Hmong populations strongly suggests they were not originally Asians. This was Savina's conclusion, and he went on to argue that it is possible to locate their original homeland prior to their migration to China by examining their language and legends." Other Hmong experts, however, attribute light hair and skin to genetic albinism rather than European ancestry.

At a Hmong funeral I heard the brother of the deceased speaking in such a way as to direct his sister's soul back from Decorah to the Lord of Heaven. After listing Decorah, he talked her back through Chicago, Seattle (her port of entry to the United States), Thailand, her Hmong villages in Laos, and finally Mongolia. Although the brother's

reference to Mongolia is in keeping with Quincy's mention of a theory in which Hmong migrated from "southwestern Eurasia" to Siberia and then down through Mongolia to China, he may have been referring to a person rather than a place--a heroine in a number of Hmong stories and legends, "Hmoob Nkauj Hlis."

Problematically, when a young Hmong couple in Decorah decided to name their daughter Mongolia after this heroine, a sponsoring friend was horrified. Not understanding the story, or even in spite of it, the sponsor felt the child should not face life named after a condition of severe retardation as in the term mongolism. However, the child now happily uses the shortened form of her name--Nkauj (Go).

According to Dr. Yang Dao in his book Les Hmong Du Laos Face au Developpement (1972, p. 6), "The Hmong are one of the most ancient peoples in Asia." They settled near the Blue River and the Yellow River where they "expanded and became prosperous under the watchful care of the spirits of their ancestors." As the story continues, the Hmong were a peace-loving people, but when they were invaded by the Han Chinese who began a bloody battle to exterminate them, they fought back. Gradually they were pushed to higher and higher mountain tops where they learned to live freely and to defend the passes ferociously. Although the Hmong battled the Chinese for four thousand years, they also

adopted Chinese customs. Quincy explains, however, that the Hmong "vigorously opposed complete assimilation. And it is this simple fact that has made their life in China so difficult" (p. 27).

Gradually the Hmong migrated south from mountain to mountain, valley to valley, defending themselves as they went, carrying all their possessions, food, and children (whatever was not loaded on their few horses), and driving their livestock in front of them. Some of the Hmong migrated to Tonkin (North Vietnam), some to Thailand, and others, who eventually came to live for awhile in Decorah, Iowa, U.S.A., migrated in the early 1800's to Laos.

The Hmong in Laos coexisted with the other people, and because they occupied the uncoveted land on the tops of mountains, they lived in relative peace for over a century. In the meantime the French had been exerting influence over Vietnam and eventually over Laos and Cambodia in an attempt to have a major trade route to China (Quincy, 1988). They were taxing the Hmong heavily and conscripting them to work on road crews. Although Hmong workers were paid, the wages were low and the time away from their crops was costly.

In 1989 the Hmong published a calendar that hung in homes of Decorah Hmong and honored three of their heros. One of these heros, whose picture occupied the space above January and February, came into power in Xieng Khouang

Province during the time of French forced labor. This kiatong (little king), Lo Blia Yao, took over the leadership of all the Hmong of Xieng Khouang when Moua Tong Ger retired in 1917 (Quincy, 1988). He, of course, had to supervise the road building, much to the anger of his fellow Hmong. However, Lo Blia Yao remains a hero to many Hmong.

The hero pictured for March and April on the foreboding black and white calendar was Touby Lyfoung. One of the first Hmong with an education, Touby Lyfoung was trained in French law and administration. In 1939 he was appointed tasseng (administrative head) of the area even though the Lao had promised the position to Lo Faydang, who, according to Quincy (p. 137), announced, "Whatever Touby and his men do, I and my men will do the opposite." Faydang backed the Pathet Lao.

"Touby's ambitions were larger than even the French imagined. It was to build a Hmong power base that enjoyed French confidence and support and then to use it as a lever to gain concessions for schools and government positions for the Hmong and eventually to demand the integration of the Hmong into Laotian national politics" (Quincy, p. 134). During World War II French soldiers took refuge from the Japanese with Hmong families who extended their humanitarian concern (Yang Dao, 1982). In the end, Touby could not rescue his people, but he remains a hero to many Hmong.

The hero pictured for May and June on the 1989 calendar is General Vang Pao. When he was 14 years old (1945), he became a messenger for and later an interpreter between the French and the Hmong in the resistance against the Japanese. After the Japanese surrendered in 1946, Touby Ly Foung wanted to reward Vang Pao by giving him a place as a civil servant, but instead Vang Pao chose the Laotian police force. Later, Vang Pao, after having again served well, was sent by a French officer, Captain Fret, to military school where, in 1952, he finished seventh in a class of 56, the sole Hmong (Larteguy 1979). He became the only Hmong to rise through the Royal Laotian Army to the rank of General (Quincy p. 164). General Vang Pao joined his ranks with the American forces, rescued U.S. pilots, and attacked the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was the pipeline for men and supplies from North Vietnam to the South.

At one time ethnography students asked a woman belonging to a small Hmong group the question,

"What do you think about General Vang Pao?"

"We don't know him. We are a very isolated people," she answered.

"You can't live in the U.S. and not read about or at least hear the talk about Vang Pao!"

"We don't know him," she replied.

This woman was neither lying nor ignorant, but had accepted one position taken by some Hmong during a particular point in history. Not only is perception of history affected by whom one knows, but by what stories one has learned, and by what loyalties one has acquired. This is as true of Hmong as it is of Decorah natives who remember presidents Kennedy, Johnson, or Nixon. Individuals who become the characters in stories or on calendars have both heroic qualities and human qualities. In Decorah people know The General or V.P. as he is sometimes called. All Decorah Hmong know him, but some know him better than others. One young Hmong telephoned Vang Pao to report his location within a few minutes of arriving in Decorah from Thailand. Some may have been less sure of his leadership, but General Vang Pao remains a hero to many.

After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, following the Geneva Accord which took the French out of North Vietnam and Laos, Laos degenerated into a civil war between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Army.

> The war seesawed back and forth until 1968 when the U. S. employed massive air power on the Plain of Jars to break the deadlock. Between 1968 and 1972, the number of bombs dropped on the plain was greater in total tons than all the bombs dropped by the U.S. in both the European and Pacific theaters during World War

> Two . . . . Nearly one third of the Laotian Hmong perished during the conflict, which included close to half of all males over the age of fifteen (Quincy, p. 164).

The heroes pictured on the pages for the months of July through December of the 1989 calendar are the pilots and soldiers of General Vang Pao's army. Before Yer Vue left Decorah, she sat on the floor where she carefully unfolded a white cloth which wrapped a picture of her husband as he had been prepared for burial and a picture of her oldest son dying as a dozen hands reached out with bandages to stop the flow of blood from their pilot hero's body. The loss is too recent to forget that these heroes were fathers, husbands, and sons.

The immediate history of the Hmong who arrived in Decorah as refugees concerned sponsors and teachers most: a history of escape from war, hunger, and the boredom and over-crowding of United Nations' sanctioned refugee camps. A general consensus among those who learned to care deeply for Hmong refugees was that sometimes the story of a family's "coming out" needed to be told for mental health reasons. The tears of the story tellers often were joined by the tears of the listeners. Friends of the Hmong began to empathize, to envision Hmong past, and to understand that most refugees were existing in a climate of mourning. They

needed grieving time for family members and friends who were lost, dead, or left behind. They needed grieving time for the homeland to which many wished to return. They told their stories with the limited English that was theirs.

> We had many corn. Many shirt and pant. Many horse. The horse carry corn, carry shirt and pant, and carry people. The soldier come. Many people die. We hurry go Mekong. Throw away corn, throw away shirt and pant, throw away the horse. Old people cry. Babies cry. Sometimes throw away old people and babies. Many, many people die (Lia Vue, 1980 ESL class).

In spite of tremendous loss of life and huge expense, Americans failed to stop Communist advances and Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on April 17, 1975, Saigon to the North Vietnamese on April 30, and "to avoid an ethnic war, which would benefit only Hanoi, the Hmong leaders took refuge in Thailand," (Larteguy, unpublished translation by Hasvold, 1980) leaving Long Cheng and the Plain of Jars.

> Vang Pao . . . climbed a small knoll and spoke in a deep voice, made hoarse with emotion: "My brothers (ku ti-neng tcha) . . . . The political situation has deteriorated to the point that I can no longer stay without causing you great harm."... Tears ran down the rough face of this man who is accused, rightly or wrongly, of having sold his people to the Americans,

> saving the Pentagon from sending a second expeditionary force, and having for this reason caused the deaths of thousands of his own people in the savage battles of the Plain of Jars (Larteguy).

After Vang Pao departed Laos, the stream of refugees intensified. Approximately forty thousand Hmong men, women, and children, whole villages, gathered to march toward Vientien in hopes of obtaining a promise from the government that it would be safe to live in Laos. Touby Ly Foung met them on the road where he said that he had been in touch with Faydang (who sided with the communist government), but Faydang never came; neither did Touby return the next day as he had promised. When the Hmong reached the small town of Hin Huep on the road to Vientien, they were met with guns, clubs, and armored vehicles. Those who did not escape into the forest were massacred (Quincy, pp. 192-193). The Lao equivalent of Pravda, Khao Xane Pathet Lao, published this assessment of the way to handle the Hmong: "It is necessary to extirpate, down to the root, the 'Hmong' minority" (Quincy, p. 192).

The story of Luther College (Decorah, Iowa) student, Nhia Her (1986), is one of thousands of escape stories:

> In 1977 the Communists attacked us in our hometown and we moved into the forest for shelter and then we moved again to a place called Nan-Fen . . . . After the

> Communists attacked Nan-Fen, my family decided to escape to Thailand . . . . We walked a month through wild jungles and big forests . . . . We reached the border between Thailand and Laos which is the Mekong River. We tried to get across it, but we couldn't because the enemies guarded the border too strong . . . As we started to return, starvation began. Many people were dying along the way because of disease and lack of food . . . . As we reached the place where we had started from, we were attacked . . . and my father was killed . . . . We lived with the Communists there for awhile and then we tried to escape to Thailand again. We did get across on April 4, 1979. We stayed in Thailand until December 6, 1979. Then we were called to the United States . . . . I came to Luther College to study and learn about the past and the modern society that I had never known before (p. 23).

Today there are approximately six million Hmong, most of them living in China, some in Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. The rest live in France, Australia, and Canada, while thousands, the majority in the west, live in the United States. Here they have sought refuge from the decimation of war. Some of the first Hmong to leave Laos (because they served directly with the American CIA in the United States' secret war) settled for awhile in Decorah, Iowa, which for a

short time had the honor of being the city with the highest per capita of Hmong in the U.S.

Decorah, a highly churched city of 8,000 residents, entered Southeast Asian refugee resettlement activities almost immediately after the fall of Saigon. Vietnamese arrived in 1975, and the first families of Hmong and Tai Dam in 1976. By 1980 a successful effort was launched to coordinate more effectively the delivery of basic needs, education, and vocational opportunity to the 296 Southeast Asian individuals located in the area served by Northeast Iowa Technical Institute (Calmar, Iowa) located ten miles from Decorah (See Table 1--Refugees Served by SEA Refugee Coordination Services 1981-Breakdown by Ethnic Groups; and Table--2 Refugees Served by SEA Refugee Coordination Services-Breakdown by Counties). The proposal of what was to become a Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA) grant stated:

> No instructional program exists in a vacuum. The ability of a person to learn is dependent upon the extent to which his/her basic needs are met. It is clear that physical and emotional needs must be handled before a person is ready to engage in a learning experience. Consequently, the ESL Specialist, the ESL Teachers, and the volunteers are engaging in activities to help the Southeast Asians meet some of their needs,

but a more comprehensive program is needed (personal papers, 1979).

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Program at Northeast Iowa Technical Institute established an advisory council in April of 1979 which merged with the Southeast Asian Refugee Coordination Services when it was formed in January of 1980 under the direction of Kao Vang, Hmong refugee. This first advisory group consisted of sponsors, a Social Services representative, a CETA representative, the Community Action Corporation Outreach worker, pastors, ESL teachers, and a Southeast Asian refugee representative. A selection from the contract drawn between the Southeast Asian Refugee Coordination services and CETA follows:

> Services provided to sponsoring agencies, groups, or individual sponsors will include information, familiarity with needs and common problems of adjustment, assistance in program development in education, health awareness and preventative health programs, as well as language assistance.
>
> Refugees will receive benefits of improved coordination of services provided to them, awareness of new programs and assistance in obtaining access to programs.
>
> Communities and agencies will be relieved of some duplication of effort, provided expertise in the

expression of needs of refugee families, awareness and contact with others in the helping network, and public information to all residents (personal papers, 1979).

For better or worse, the Hmong and other refugees had begun on the path through American bureaucracy and the American neighborhood. A decade later their journey continues in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado, North Carolina, or California. At the farewell party for a young uncle leaving for California, eight of his nieces and nephews drew maps of the La Crosse, Wisconsin, neighborhood in which they now live. A video tape of the process reveals that each of the young people, ages nine through seventeen, who had received their formal education in American schools, began by drawing a square--a building or a block--rather than by drawing first a road as most American young people would do. These drawings may indicate how psychologically important boundaries are to those who have spent centuries establishing and maintaining their distinct identity as compared to the open road concept of the American psyche. It is also interesting to note that the five-and-six-year-old Hmong children drew a ninja turtle, a bird, and Princess Di.

## Theory

On the journey toward understanding Decorah Hmong, the student of cross-cultural boundaries (refugee sponsor)

benefits from exploring both the rational-choice paradigm of the materialists (White, 1949, 1969; Harris, 1979; and Taylor, 1988) and idealist theories (Benedict, 1934; Douglas, 1966; Geertz, 1973, 1983, 1988; and Levi-Strauss, 1985). In applying these theories the beginner may feel like the proverbial blind men touching the elephant: one theory reveals a snake while the other theory reveals a rope; it may be that the students themselves, the observer-participants, define what the elephant "is or is not." In describing the other culture, the student reveals more about "us" than about "them" (Scholte, 1984, p. 963). Even though the sponsor will never know the Hmong and their diversity completely and cannot comprehend either this culture or another perfectly, the student/sponsor can receive guidance from the theorists and may find points at which their theories intersect with one another or with their own experience. It has been kept in mind through this research that people are more important than the theories that describe their lives, that it is more important to support a family than a theory, to protect privacy than to reveal naked truth.

According to Daniel Little (1991) the central premise of the rational-choice paradigm is that "individual behavior is goal-directed and calculating" (p. 36). Individuals in a given environment have interests which they attempt to

further by making various choices and settling upon actions for their own benefit. For example, how Hmong align themselves with Christian churches or ignore them; how they satisfy their needs for food and shelter; why they seek out employment or opt for welfare and medical assistance; why they move from one American city to another can, in part, be answered by the rational-choice theory. Leslie A. White states a classic definition of this theory:

> Technology is the hero of our piece. This is a world of rocks and rivers, sticks and steel, of sun, air, and starlight, of galaxies, atoms, and molecules. Man is but a particular kind of material body who must do certain things to maintain his status in a cosmic material system. The means of adjustment and control, of security and survival, are of course technological. Culture thus becomes primarily a mechanism for harnessing energy and of putting it to work in the service of man, and, secondarily, of channelling and regulating his behavior not directly concerned with subsistence and offense and defense. Social systems are therefore determined by technological systems . . . . (1988 [1949, 1969], p. 353).

Robert Cooper in Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response (1984) would agree with White's emphasis on the technological and material. He focuses on and carefully

describes Hmong swidden agriculture, cash opium crops, domestic labor, and distribution of surplus wealth. He says Hmong ideology is "not a static consciousness of self-identity and correct behavior, but is undergoing constant redefinition as the economic structure--the material life of a society--comes into conflict with the existing relations of production" (p. 247). The Hmong struggle to accept or reject the American scene as they continue to redefine their society by borrowing from their new neighbors much as they have from the Chinese for thousands of years (p. 220) also needs to be explored, including the material life of the Hmong society in America.

Marvin Harris, significant cultural materialist, criticizes the idealists:

> To endow the mental superstructure with strategic priority, as the cultural idealists advocate, is a bad bet. Nature is indifferent to whether God is a loving father or a bloodthirsty cannibal. But nature is not indifferent to whether the fallow period in a swidden field is one year or ten (1988 [1979], p. 387).

With his insistence that "etic and behavioral conditions and processes" always take precedence over "emic and mental conditions and processes" Harris determines that myth, religion, ethnic and national ideologies, kinship, symbols, and all other mental and emic components always come last.

In conversation with the Hmong, however, one would not easily be convinced of a prioritizing that leaves "stories" such as those recorded in this paper to the end. To the Hmong, stories are primary.

Michael Taylor (1988), more emic than other materialists such as White or Harris, refers to the "thin" theory of rationality and its three primary characteristics; this "thin theory implies an intersection with the idealists.

> (i) Rationality is relative to <u>given</u> attitudes and beliefs...and the agent's actions are instrumental in achieving or advancing the given aims in light of the given beliefs....(ii) The agent is assumed to be egoistic. (iii) In application of the thin theory the range of incentives assumed to affect the agent is limited....to economic or material incentives and [social rewards and punishments] (p. 66).

Hmong are rational in terms of who they are. They apply the present environment to their given history and psychology, and if sponsors understand this and the characteristics above, they will apply this knowledge to resettlement problems. However, it is difficult for sponsors to conclude that, "When faced with several courses of action, people [Hmong] usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome" (Elster 1989 p.

22). Sponsors tend to think of refugees as immature, childlike, simple, or irrational because they do not speak English, may be illiterate, or are not Christian. The Hmong, however, have weighed everything from a different point of view and have made a value judgement based on that evidence. Sponsors don't see Hmong going through this process and believe that the newcomers need to be guided when in fact they <u>are</u> being guided by their own sense of what is best and by the choices and mental processes which have always guided them. This may be the major reason that most sponsorships are short lived (See Table 5--Hmong Sponsored by Decorah Lutheran Church, Length of Stay in Decorah). When sponsoring groups look upon the Hmong immigrant as an adult agent with "given attitudes and beliefs" different from sponsors' attitudes and beliefs, making decisions to benefit himself and his family both economically and socially, the sponsoring group will be more likely to drop its maternalistic attitude.

Surveying the theories leads one to look closer at the idealists. Studying Hmong kinship, marriage, or death customs requires "the sort of hermeneutic culturally specific investigation recommended by interpretation theory" (Little, 1991, p. 49) and by other idealist theories which preceded it. The central premises of the idealists include "thick description" (Geertz), inductive reasoning (Boas),

and the belief that where values differ each lifeway is unlike any other (Benedict). The paradox of crossing cultural boundaries is that one must keep in mind not only how much peoples are alike, the universals and rational-choice, but also how they differ from culture to culture. When seeking knowledge of the Hmong, it is possible to see truth through either of the two paradigms. It is best to keep both theories operating and to glean evidence about Hmong culture from both. The two are not mutually exclusive. But what do the idealists have to say?

Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger (1966, p. 73) discusses the very real differences between "us" and "them." She indicates that it is "impossible to make any headway" with the study of culture if we cannot discover and accept our differences. The lifeway of the Hmong is different from that of the lifeway of the sponsors in host communities. The Hmong do not live by rice alone, but are products of distinct clan relationship, values, religion, and cosmology which help define their resources and the world around them. For example, the fact that heart cannot be eaten by one clan defines, in part, who a Hmong individual is, not only in Laos, but also in Decorah, Iowa. The danger caused by the taboo of foods is very clear and important to the insider, but unfathomable to most outsiders. (This type of taboo is not to be confused, however, with the natural revulsion a

Hmong family felt toward the idea of eating a whole box of kidneys delivered to them by a sponsor.)

Ruth Benedict in Patterns of Culture (1934) urges the student of cultures to consider that people of unique cultures

> . . . . are travelling along different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable (p. 223).

Moving from the metaphorical to a specific, it may be helpful for the reader to examine the following comparison. Because Hmong mountain paths are dangerous, sometimes patrolled by wild animals, strangers rather than kinsmen, and "Neng spirits" or wandering souls (Quincy, 1988, p. 86), over generations the Hmong traveler has learned to hold closely all information about route and travel schedule. This behavior is rational from his point of view. He shares that information with reticence and out of courtesy does not ask others for such information. How he shares information is part of his protocol. Consequently, if a sponsor arrives at a Hmong residence to register the children for school, or provide a ride to the doctor or grocery store and the head of the household is not at home, it may be very difficult to extract an answer from the rest of the family as to where he

might be. He may be a couple of blocks away, over the dike fishing, or he may have gone to California because his cousin is sick. His manner of communicating holds true to learned rules of rationality.

On the other hand, if a Decorah native drives at high speeds on wide U.S. Highways, if his knowledge of route and his "busy" schedule indicate something of his status, and if he does not believe that troublesome spirits follow him, he may disseminate information about his location and itinerary widely and loudly in a way that is rational from a U.S. perspective. Such may be one small "incommensurable" difference between Hmong and main-stream American. For Hmong, conventions regarding discussion of travel information do not change in the U.S. even though the mode of travel converts from foot to fast cars.

Sometimes when anthropologists are defining their theories or expounding on them, they address the need to use those theories for problem solving. In 1934 on the eve of World War II, Mary Douglas described a world full of "nationalism and racial snobbery . . . . There has never been a time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-conscious, who can see objectively the socially conditioned behavior of other people without fear and recrimination" (Douglas 1966, pp. 10-11). Those who work in the post Vietnam refugee

resettlement era also see racism side by side with uninformed generosity. The world has not improved when it comes to relations between racial groups. It is currently fashionable to talk of diversity in culture, global studies, and international interaction as positive and popular goals educationally and politically, but little thought is given to the change of paradigm necessary for one to move from ethnocentricity to some degree of understanding of even one "other" culture. Those of us trying to work in refugee resettlement are often like the characters in the fable about the monkey and the fish in a flood. The monkey stood on the branch of the tree and watched the fish struggling in the water below. When the monkey reached down and scooped the fish out of the swirling water, he was surprised that the fish was ungrateful. Learning about another culture is a matter of exposure and vulnerability; making observations, and assumptions, and coming to conclusions; then being corrected and corrected again; being taught and then internalizing lessons. Lessons are to be learned whether one is part of the dominant culture or the minority culture.

As the Decorah Hmong and their sponsors are discussed in this paper, it is important to remember that there are always at least two "journeys" to be considered: that of the Hmong and that of the Decorah native. Imagine, for example, the feelings of both visitors and participants at a

"wa neng" or healing ceremony held in a modern housing project in a nearby city. At a time like this, "the trick [for the sponsor or student anthropologist] is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (Geertz, 1983, p. 58). For the Hmong, the trick is to reveal just the correct amount of information to the sponsors so as not to lose their support and yet not so much information as to betray his or her culture.

While the shaman, in a four and one half hour trance "rides his horse" through the world of spirits in search of ancestor's answers to his patient's illness, the rest of the family contends with modern nuisances, such as butchering a pig inside the city limits, forgetting to disconnect the smoke alarm which goes off when the spirit money is burned in an aluminum roaster in the living room, and trying to ignore a nagging concern that neighbors will call the police because they become aware of unfamiliar Hmong sounds and sights.

The sponsors smell the incense and hear the chanting and jingle of metal rings as they walk up the sidewalk to the apartment. Their prejudice and apprehension begin to

dissolve almost immediately in the hospitality. They are given positions of honor on the sofa and fortified with warm Mountain Dew. As the ceremony proceeds, the sponsors are given detailed information about Ya Teng, father of many, respected leader, who is feeling better now and appears euphoric.

Ya Teng has been told that his intense headaches will no longer be a problem. In his trance, the shaman has found Ya Teng's parents. The shaman's wife is translating from the chant to Hmong because the shaman is "speaking in tongues," and on occasion the nephew translates from Hmong to English. The message Ya Teng's mother and father send him follows:

"Do not worry, you don't need to come to our graves in Laos to show respect. We will come to you. You can honor us in Iowa."

Many children play about the room and out in the yard. The sun slips in around the drawn shades. The doors are open and the soft breezes keep the room comfortable. An exhaust fan over the electric stove in the kitchen draws out heat generated by the cooking pork and rice. To the sponsors, the rhythm of the chanting becomes soothing and hypnotic, still strange, but no longer threatening.

After hours of bounding on his wooden bench, beyond apparent human strength and endurance, the shaman slowly

returns to himself with the help of several assistants, smokes a cigarette in silence, and then with a smile and a strong, dry handshake welcomes Ya Teng's sponsors. The pork is cooked and served, and the shaman invites the sponsors to offer prayers before everyone eats. The shaman is very ecumenical, taking whatever might be good and helpful from any religion. This is a peaceful time, a happy time, a healing time. It is a time for going about the business of cooking, conversing, and sharing hospitality, but it is not the same experience for all participants. We can return to Douglas to gather our thoughts.

"The right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety . . . " (1966, p. 77). For the rest of this paper one might keep in mind the words of Claude Levi-Strauss.

> Ethnographical observation does not, therefore, oblige us to choose between two hypotheses: either a plastic mind passively shaped by outside influences; or universal psychological laws that everywhere give rise to and invite the same properties regardless of history and of particular environment. Rather, what we witness and try to describe are attempts to realize a sort of compromise between certain historical trends and special characteristics of the environment, on the one

> hand, and, on the other, mental requirements that in each area carry on previous ones of the same kind. In adjusting to each other, these two orders of reality mingle so as to make a meaningful whole (1984 [1972], p. 104).

As a latecomer to the field of anthropology and entering by way of fifteen years experience with the Hmong rather than through academic or scientific paths, I favor relativity, believing as Scholte (1984 p. 962) "that all standards of reason are in the final analysis local and conventional and thus context-dependent and reducible to identifiable sociocultural circumstances." However, each theory might be put to some use, remembering that it may be said of the theorists as it was of the blind men observing the elephant, "each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong" (Saxe, 1940, p. 176).

## Method

All of the informants for this paper were among the 52 Hmong who attended the adult Northeast Iowa Technical Institute English as a Second Language Program and who lived in Decorah, Iowa, during or after 1976 or were Hmong who are part of their extended families. Although I was a teacher at one time or another to all 52, know all of their children by name, and visited all of their homes, those I listened to most often had indicated a strong desire to "tell their

stories." Some of these individuals wanted very much to analyze their own identity and situation. For the duration of this paper they will be referred to as "Decorah Hmong" even though they have left the area. The majority moved from Iowa by 1984.

I visited Hmong in Boulder, Colorado, Thanksgiving Day, 1989; Samtong Village, North Carolina, June 6, 1990; La Crosse, Wisconsin, between 1980 and 1991; St. Paul, Minnesota, June 14, 1990; and Decorah, Iowa, between 1976 and 1991. The questions I asked included: How are you preserving [keeping] your Hmong culture? How are Hmong people changing? What is happening in your life today? Although these questions started people talking relatively freely, I did not feel comfortable entering with a tape recorder to transcribe conversations. Decorah Hmong valued tape recorders and obtained them soon after their arrival from Thailand. Since many were illiterate, cassettes provided the means to communicate with family back in refugee camps or in Laos. This use of recordings, however, was private and in their own language; the messages included a collection of bird sounds from Laos, singing, or, in one case, a sobbing young girl's appeal to her uncle for support after the death of all the other members of her family while trying to cross the Mekong river. On the other hand, my use of the tape recorder might reduce these people to "mere

objects of study" (Lifton, p. 88). I did not take notes but wrote down my recollections. I was led by the Hmong and tried not to fit my observations into preconceived conclusions.

## PART II WEARING THE RIGHT SHIRT--PATHFINDERS

### Leaving Decorah

> I don't have father, mother. I don't have no friend, no relative. I came to America to look for someone as my parents, but I did not find any as my parents. I don't have anything to eat and wear. Even that, I still can not learn English. I have to work and was hired by American; I will--with a lot of sadness and with a tear falling out of my eye. Whoever hear, will they help me to support (Txoua Xiong, personal communication, 1984).

Txoua, a Hmong refugee from Laos, was leaving Decorah, Iowa, disillusioned with American life and fearful about his future, when he gave me this poem and a cassette tape of the kheng music and Hmong words he had composed. Txoua's song emerges from a long ethnic tradition and echoes "orphan stories" (Johnson, 1985, p. 169), but it is also fixed in the present, in English lessons and jobs. Txoua's needs are real and his motivation compelling.

As a kheng player, a spirit-path finder, Txoua leads his clan, but in Decorah he could not shelter his family

from harassment on the streets, from phone calls threatening his children with death, or from growing hopelessness.

The influx of Southeast Asian refugees which began in 1975 after Vietnam and the Secret War in Laos prompted generous sponsorship in Decorah, but also roused a backlash against refugees portrayed by a dual of words in the bi-weekly Decorah Public Opinion. Headlines from "Letters to the Editor" section include:

> GOOD SHEPHERD PASTOR ASKS RETURN OF CHERISHED GIFT
> (Hmong crossbow stolen from church, June 1979)
>
> SUGGESTS REFUGEES BE 1ST TO REGISTER FOR ANY DRAFT
> (July 29, 1980)
>
> CONTENDS ANIMOSITY TO REFUGEES 'SELF-PRESERVATION,' NOT RACISM
> (August 28, 1980)

In 1983 Txoua wrote a letter to the editor which he believed would explain Hmong people to Decorah residents and set to rest all objections locals had toward his people:

> I want to explain why we Hmong refugees came to the U.S. . . . Many people misunderstood that this country was a wealthy country, but that is not why I came. I came because of the political relationship between my people and the United States. The American government promised us that they would help protect us from the hand of communism....They also promised us that if we helped bring back their pilots from North Vietnam they would protect us until the end, and if anything

happened, they would protect us by bringing us to this country [America] . . . .

I was involved in the Indochinese war from 1965 until 1975. I was wounded three times . . . .

In 1975 the CIA told us to continue to fight, to resist against communists. As we continued to fight we ran out of weapons, food, and clothing. So in 1979 I began to feel that the CIA had lied to me. I decided to flee from Laos to Thailand. In 1980 I came to the United States.

I hope that American people will understand Hmong people and help us find jobs or use the welfare until we can support ourselves.

Peter Scholl, Decorah, was impressed by Txoua's letter, "touched by his plea for understanding." He replied to further criticism of refugees in the following manner:

Some of the respondents to Mr. Xiong's letter seem almost to have read a different letter than the one I read. When he mentioned that the United States government had made certain promises, it did not seem to me that what he had in mind were shiny automobiles, new bicycles, homes, and the like. I do not know a lot about Laos or about Hmong culture, but I only had to look at an old "National Geographic" to discover that before these people came here, many of them probably

> had never seen or even heard of such things--much less schemed at ways of getting over here to find ways of getting them "for free". . . . We need all the imagination we can muster to imagine how things look in Decorah from Hmong eyes. We seem much readier to imagine ways in which the Hmong might be getting, too soon, more than their fair share. And it seems awfully difficult, even with a computer, to know just what a fair share is. Do we have so little, even with the recession, that we need to strain our mercy with a screen so scrupulous and so fine (1983)?

Txoua Xiong, however, refused to stay where he was not wanted. Decorah Hmong fit the human condition described by Abraham Maslow; they were motivated by their needs: physiological, safety and security, social belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. They looked for protection for themselves and their families from physical, social, or spiritual challenges. When Txoua's need for "face," dignity and self-respect, were not met, when he was no longer valued by "the Americans" as he had been during the battles along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he described his insult in the simple terms of no food, no shelter, and no parents. He portrayed himself metaphorically as a starving orphan and left Decorah.

According to Nicholas Tapp (1986, p. 93), "the oral legends of the Hmong about their past have much to teach us about real history; that is, a history which is being lived and felt now." With this oral history, including orphan stories like Txoua's, Hmong reveal the foundation upon which they base their self awareness. Carrying their stories with them, feeling lonely and frightened as orphans, the Hmong must now construct and follow labyrinths between traditional life, technological American life, and their futures.

**Samthong Village**

To know the Hmong is to be encouraged by their hospitality. Consequently, my husband and I felt free to travel to North Carolina to visit Kao, his wife Dia, and their three children. (Kao Vang had worked as the first director of the Southeast Asian Refugee Coordination Services which existed through the efforts of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Luther College, Northeast Iowa Technical Institute, many volunteers, and part-time English as a Second Language teachers to meet emergency needs of refugees in Winneshiek county and six surrounding counties.)

Al and I arrived at Samthong Village near Mt. Gilead, North Carolina, June 6, 1990. Bamboo grew thirty feet high, jungle rather than national forest, at the entrance to Kao's mountain settlement. In spite of Jack Pine and deciduous trees, the bamboo marked this place as Hmong.

The soil was very rocky: shiny white pink-veined quartz and black shale covered the steep road; large sandstone boulders had been bulldozed to make a flat place for the trailer home; the thin top soil which had been scraped aside was carefully saved for a small garden in which hot peppers, onions, and greens grew. Kao could look down his driveway and see anyone coming up; he could see the main road below. Yi-Fu Tuan in Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience (1977) might have been speaking about the Vangs: "The nomadic tribes of Mongolia, ...once held the idea that they inhabit the top of a broad mound, the slopes of which are occupied by other races" (p. 39).

As soon as we climbed out of the car, we were embraced and then shook hands formally. My husband and I were escorted to the deck where we snacked on strawberries and cantaloupe. Kao said the shrimp for supper was imported from Indonesia; I noticed that the chicken came from IGA; the poultry raised here at Samthong village is for ceremony.

Handsome roosters, rust or black, trimmed in red or gold or green, strutted inside the spacious woven wire coop. In the morning they call up the sun. Hens scratched about, and chicks of various sizes ran around as if to accomplish great things before the sun went down again. These same creatures serve as offering or sacrifice; they help to make a marriage, heal the sick, and welcome the newly born.

Twenty-four trailers, each surrounded by two acres of tree-covered land, made up the village. Hmong, Lowland Lao, Mien and Lao Theung lived there and worked for "The Company": shoe factory, lodge, and car dealership.

I asked Kao if his family found a church in the area since they had been sponsored originally by a Lutheran congregation in Decorah. He said, "The church down here (Baptist) is very useful. They gave us a chain saw." Kao also mentioned that when they lived in Chicago they attended a church (Lutheran), but the pastor wasn't friendly, and " . . . we didn't need that, so we never went back."

The pragmatic Hmong approach to religion is based on a long tradition of animism and ancestor worship. Robert Cooper (1984) states in Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response that, "The Christian makes a virtue of his poverty; the Hmong animist, on the other hand, is obliged to work hard at accumulation of spiritual gain by buying or breeding cows and pigs (pigs are used in all religious ceremonies; cows are reserved for funerals and very serious illness)" (p. 169). The tradition is continued here in the states. For example, a Hmong family might arrive at the sponsor's home asking that the sponsor help them find a cow to be killed in honor of the ancestors because the head of the household has been cured of bad dreams and other illnesses. They have four hundred dollars which will purchase only a

small critter but here in the States few farmers want to part with a young, healthy animal in the summer when the grass is green and the gain will be good. In Laos sacrifice was not easy either; it was possible to own sacrificial animals only after much hard work and a careful balance of the food supply. Sometimes a chicken or even an egg, if one was very poor, must suffice for tribute. However, if the paths of the ancestors are to be followed, sacrifice is necessary. Now in the U.S. sacrifice must continue, and one still needs "wealth" to purchase pigs and cows.

Only through wealth (ownership or the money to buy livestock) can Hmong achieve spiritual well being; consequently, it follows that religion, or religious conversion might be associated with material motivation. A very poor Hmong group might choose "free" Christianity, or might choose the churches which offer something needed for well being in the United States. Kao and others would not vary from the religion of their ancestors unless another religion could give them something they needed very much. Since they have so closely connected wealth, not poverty, with spiritual matters, tangible rewards of Christianity would probably be the first rewards to attract a convert. Might one receive education from the church, food and clothing, a chain saw? These questions foreshadow other

examples of religious issues to be touched upon in this paper.

Samtong Village is an experiment by Hmong which could be studied materialistically and historically with meaningful results. It was begun by a North Carolina businessman in cooperation with Hmong to supply a dependable work force for a factory and to encourage a stable Hmong lifestyle. One goal of the Hmong initially involved in the project was to provide a "traditional" village site. Although working for wages is not a typically Hmong way to live, they thought that if wage earning could be coupled with farm life (gardening and raising chickens), Hmong could establish a way to control the religious and sacrificial portion of their lives. They might establish a basis of income that would support ancestor worship and clan structure. The project was actually a major departure from tradition, and therefore it became difficult to fill the quota of families needed for the project. Consequently other ethnic groups besides the Hmong have been recruited to live in the trailers and work for "the company." The clan was reluctant to follow educated young Hmong leaders who were seeking out opportunities to become financially self-sufficient within American culture rather than to follow elders.

The material aspects of this particular attempt to establish a Hmong American life style failed to impact on those aspects of culture held most dear by the Hmong: social relationships, symbols, a unique cosmology, and a sense of control over Hmong identity. During our visit we experienced evidence of this when Uncle Yer and his wife joined us for the evening meal and the fellowship afterwards. We sat and talked about old friends, and Kao and Uncle Yer told stories about tigers, dragons, snakes, and the war. I wondered about the gun that lay across the lawn chair. A fine hunting rifle extending the arm of protection, it killed North Carolina snakes.

Uncle Yer told about another danger, a danger to one's "soul," to one's identity; he talked about a time when it was dangerous to comment about the beauty of a woman or the handsomeness of a man. If you did, the person died in about three days, and you saw the footprints of the tiger around the house. Uncle Yer also spoke of healing and marking certain signs on the back of a person's shirt to hold the spirit of the individual. Most importantly, he told the story of two women and their shirts.

> Two Hmong women were picking fruit. One climbed into the tree to reach the fruit. The women became too hot, so they took off their shirts. The woman in the tree

put her shirt in the tree; the woman on the ground put her shirt on the ground.

After awhile a soldier came along. He stopped and asked the women to carry supplies to the camp. The woman in the tree climbed down and picked up the shirt on the ground. The woman on the ground reached up and took the shirt in the tree. They put on the shirts and went to help the soldier.

After the women came back, the first woman went to her house. When she went in the door, her husband looked at her and said, "Why are you here? You're not my wife." And the children said, "You're not our mother." The woman could do nothing.

The second woman went to her house. When she went in the door, her husband looked at her and said, "Why are you here? You're not my wife. You have the face of the other woman." And the children said, "You're not our mother." The woman walked away with no place to go. The woman could do nothing.

Uncle Yer concluded with the comment, "I don't know if this story is true, but they tell me it's true."

To be Hmong is to wear the right shirt, which, as a later story will illustrate, includes speaking the right

language. Hmong sewing or pan'dao (meaning flower cloth: embroidery and reverse applique) might be compared with art work of other non-literate peoples which has been referred to as "equivalent to the founding of the world" (Gill, 1982, p. 21). Stitched on collars, belts, and bags, pan'dao "mark[s] the wearer as a . . . human, warning spirits to keep away, and . . . identify[s] the wearer as belonging to a certain clan" (Gazzolo, 1986, p. 1). The women in the story lost their protection and thus their identities when they inadvertently exchanged shirts. The women's spirits, who "mingle and converse with one another, through the medium of paths . . . " (p. 16) may have become confused and lost their ways. They might even have taken "the road of orphanage (txoj kev ntsoj, txoj kev ntsuag)" (p. 16) as Txoua Xiong's spirit was tempted to do when he left Decorah.

For Hmong to give up their distinctive but individualized identity would be to give up control over their lives. Hmong without their shirts "could do nothing"; their boundaries would be lost. The major problem of Hmong in the U.S. is to apply their knowledge of past boundaries to a new situation--they fuse themselves as a small but recognizable political unit as well as social unit. Hmong recognize a variety of boundary markers from the past and can be observed applying them or not after family discussion and clan consultation.

The life of the Hmong is controlled by their symbols, their boundary markers, but is "grounded" in their environment--in Laos the mountains, rivers, forests and gardens, the poppies, the trade of goods; in the U.S. the cities, the mountains, rivers, woods, gardens, the welfare and the trade of labor for wage.

To be Hmong is also to walk with and be named by the right people--those defined as family and clan, insiders. The women in Uncle Yer's story walked with soldiers, outsiders, not family. They left the people who knew their names, those who had true authority over them. To walk with the right people also means to marry within the tradition, obeying the tabu against intra-clan marriage or, for the most part, against marrying outside the Hmong people. (In the real world, on the other hand, one young man did marry a Decorah native, and in areas of larger Hmong population other successful marriages are taking place to both white and black Americans.) Hmong retain their father's clan name for life; women do not change their names when they marry. To be named by the right people also involves changing a man's given name to show belongingness in the adult world. Kao explained that a man's name is changed after he has several children and has proven himself a satisfactory husband, father, and adult member of the clan. When possible, this name is given to a man by his father-in-law.

In some clans a man is not permitted full status or the right to speak at clan meetings until he has his second name. (Names are also changed on occasion of serious illness or other catastrophic happening in order to divert evil or attract good.)

Many of Kao's old friends had changed names (sometimes according to Kao without good cause). He exclaimed, "When I try to call them, I can't find them in the phone book!" Tradition, identity, and technology clash. Sometimes tradition wins.

When I asked Hmong men if I could use their names to identify portions of this text, several agreed insistently, but made it very clear that their mature names must by used, not the names from their youth, which was the way I had first known them. The fact that changing the names of mature men continues at nearly a 100% rate (according to one informant) is an indication of how tenaciously Hmong cling to their culture.

The daily lives of Decorah Hmong often uphold and nourish cultural identity. Hmong identity is Hmong religion. Hmong do not separate shirts and language and ancestors and the spirit world and birth and healing and marriage and death, but maintain a holistic, all encompassing approach to life. At the core of Hmong life is a body of knowledge taught by the elders to young adults and

acting as a magnet, though unseen, drawing the people together to a center. In Hmong culture it may be as Mary Catherine Bateson (1989, 1988) implies by her question, "What if certain kinds of secrecy do in fact function as markers for the sacred, but that's because 'the sacred' is a way of coping with certain epistemological problems--maybe necessary ones?" (p. 89) Hmong epistemology is secret from outsiders, secret from the young, and unavailable to the "unschooled." The Hmong "may not appear to be cognizant of, or concerned about, the symbolic content" (Gazzolo, p. 46) of their dress and ways, but that may be because some of them do not have the opportunity to learn from their elders about the symbolic content and others, knowing, guard the secret from the outsider. Whether they know the stories or not, all Hmong realize that their clothing is one of the things that makes them Hmong.

It may be interesting at this point to consider briefly Gregory Bateson's (1987, 1988) attitude toward the supernatural and the mechanical as it may relate to an idealist or materialist approach to the study of the Hmong. "I do not know what to do except to make abundantly clear what opinions I hold regarding the supernatural on the one hand and the mechanical on the other. Very simply, let me say that I despise and fear both of these extremes of opinion and that I believe both extremes to be

epistemologically naive, epistemologically wrong, and politically dangerous. They are also dangerous to something which we may loosely call mental health" (pp. 52-53). The Hmong have found a middle ground by integrating their material/mechanical world with the supernatural; they continue to wear the right shirt and walk with the right people.

**Bride's Suitcase**

> "That the truths of one culture are not the same as another is not cause for alarm, nor should it engage us in relative valuation. Rather we should focus upon the enormous capacity of human beings to make creative and meaningful responses to the profundity of life through their formal ritual actions" (Gill, 1982, p. 97).

When a Hmong teenager visited my home shortly after her arrival from Thailand, she was fascinated by the large wooden cupboard in the dining room and asked whether or not it was filled with gold and silver. Her exploration of the contents revealed "good dishes," chosen by a small-town, middle-class bride and her mother, registered at a local gift shop in the bride and groom's names to be purchased by guests for the wedding. A look of disappointment filled the young face--the contents were so carefully "packaged" in a polished oak cabinet, that they should have had great value. However, to a potential Hmong bride they were neither

substance nor token of status, love, stability, history, or wealth. She viewed those dishes as a nuisance, a potential burden. One couldn't move easily with a load of dishes, especially dishes which break.

It is interesting to note that sometimes Hmong families must unburden themselves of freezers, washing machines, dryers, and numerous other accumulation urged on them by well meaning sponsors when their finances cannot support moving, storing, or paying the utilities for such possessions. More important to them than these material items, however, is being together with other Hmong in the correct social and political configuration. Marriages are one way to accomplish this and to increase a family's strength, influence, and wealth.

On the first day of Pang's wedding the groom's family brought whiskey and a ceremonial chicken to her home; her family provided food. Wedding negotiators, "mej koob" (not to be confused with those Americans call clan leaders) who knew the rituals, songs, and negotiation techniques, represented both bride and groom and searched family histories to determine if a marriage between the young people could proceed. This accomplished, bride-price negotiations continued into the early morning hours. Cousins slept almost wall-to-wall in the Xiongs' apartment after the night's bargaining.

Hmong women carry into marriage a trousseau stitched with love and pride by the bride's mother (or, in the U.S., purchased in spite of considerable financial hardship), and designed to serve for the rest of the bride's life and even her death as identification, as protection, and as a traditional source of pride.

On the second day of Pang's wedding, her mother and half a dozen other women examined the clothing packed for Pang in a large, new, brown suitcase. A young man wearing a white shirt and a black tie carefully recorded a detailed inventory of the contents: one Green Hmong skirt, two White Hmong skirts, three Hmong shirts, three front skirt panels, three Hmong blouses, three black velvet shirts and pants with back and front panels, one purple silk head wrap, one pan' dao hat, three black and white stripped bands to wrap around the purple silk head wrap, two pan' dao bags, six pan' dao belts, one pair of gold earrings, and one large silver necklace. No shoes were included; Hmong need slippers after they die to begin the journey to the Lord of Heaven, but Pang's will be added later. The young man who kept a record of the "phij chuam" (box carrying the dowry) made very clear the seriousness of the occasion; his demeanor approximated that of an American undertaker. Later he also recorded the gifts. Money was the primary gift, but the sponsors and a few others gave household items.

After marriage, a bride owes her greatest loyalty to her husband's clan and must spend her time working for them; consequently, Pang and her mother shed abundant tears. Pang would no longer spend time caring for her own younger brothers and sisters but would begin to help care for the children in her husband's family. Her mother scolded with last minute instructions about being a good wife by reminding Pang of another orphan story, "The Orphan returned home to live with Nia Ngao Kou Ker. But he found that she was lazy. She wouldn't do anything but just lie around and sleep all day, with her legs bent and her knees drawn up" (Johnson, 1985, p. 163). Never should Pang be such a wife but should help her mother-in-law and be a credit to her husband's family.

Later the bride whispered to her American sponsor that one of the outfits in the suitcase will someday serve as her funeral clothes. For the present, she appeared pale but vital and competent, wrapped with a red and white checked apron over her pink taffeta wedding dress. Her mother bought the dress because, "Pang will marry only once and should have something new." Pang stood in the kitchen slicing limes for the men taking part in the ritualized drinking ceremony and the ritualized rhetoric.

Pang's umbrella hung on the wall, wrapped in a black and white striped sash that can also be used to fasten the

woman's head dress. Later, Pang, seventeen, mature for a Hmong bride, changed into her Hmong clothing and was escorted to the home of and her husband and his family.

As in Pang's case, marriage negotiations continue in the United States, but have changed slightly. They may include agreements that a young woman be allowed to continue her education. They may include the provision of a car. The bride may on some occasions be allowed to marry without the bride price. Although components of the American technological society have some impact on the Hmong marriage traditions, the core of tradition continues in ritual.

According to Yang Dao (1976), Hmong in Laos "set aside [savings] against solemn occasions and important transactions such as those that surround wedding ceremonies. (Silver is used to pay the bride's dowry. In the old days it was anywhere from 3 to 20 bars of silver. In 1964, it was set at 6 bars of silver in the Samthong-Long Cheng region . . . . ) Under such circumstances, none of its monetary equivalents can take the place of silver, because it alone can conjure up the magic of wealth" (p. 101).

For the First Hmong Language Conference, while Kao Vang (1981) lived and worked in Decorah, he traveled to Minneapolis to conduct research about attitudes held by Hmong in America toward the bride price. After interviewing some of the former supervisors of villages, Kao Vang

reported, "In the old days, God told Tub Liaj Lus and Ntruv Me that every young man that marries should pay the bride price as follows: kub peb txias (gold)--3 grams; nyiav peb lag (silver)--3 ounces. This would give their lives sunshine and no trouble to their families, because God said so" (p. 41).

Kao Vang emphasized that the primary reason for the bride price is to bind families together. "Divorce not only separated you from your wife or husband, it also separates you from all of your relationships with their clan. The Hmong say 'Choj lov kev tu.' In English this means, "If the bridge is broken down, the road cannot be travelled" (p. 44). The bride price helps to strengthen the bridges between families.

Kao also quotes a village elder who says, "It is not in human nature for the young to follow the elderly [accurately], but the young bee [also] is a poor follower and must practice following dancers before it can accurately perceive another bee's dance" (p. 43). Many Hmong young people are learning to follow, at least in regard to the bride price. All of the thirty teenagers Kao Vang interviewed agreed that it was necessary to continue the tradition; 60% of educated people 30-60 years of age agreed and 82% of uneducated people 30-60 years of age agreed.

Pang Cher Vue (1991), Luther College graduate, states in an unpublished thesis on game theory:

> The goal of decision maker A is to maximize words of respect, the groom's promise of love and good care for their daughter, to keep the brideprice to be paid according to traditional wedding norms and values. The aim of decision maker B is to win the bride for the groom and to minimize the expenses that the groom must pay because of any norms, such as kidnapping the bride, have been broken. Decision maker A is not interested in maximizing and decision maker B is not interested in minimizing the brideprice, generally. In America, the price is about a thousand dollars. In LaCrosse, the standard price is $800, for example (p.41).

In 1991 Hmong are not surprised at a price of $2,500 in the case of a kidnapping. Current brideprices in Saint Paul/Minneapolis are considered to be $3,000-$3,500 while those in California are probably double this amount. The most important factor of the bride "price" is not the money, but the symbolism and the continuity of a system, a tradition, and an identity.

When I visited in North Carolina, I asked Vang Yer whether marriage customs were religious or only "tradition." He answered with this statement: "When you bring a new girl into the family, she must be instilled with the spirit of

her husband's family by passing the chicken over her." Vang Ger implied the need for spirit without defining religion. With a smile he asked if we knew that the umbrella hanging on the wall signified that marriage negotiations were in process. We know, but we know only as outsiders know.

**Baby Carrier**

Neither garage sales nor family heirlooms play an important part in outfitting the Hmong newborn. After Pang's baby was born, one of the respected older women told that clothing was as important to the infant as it had been for the bride. Clothing identifies the infant, and clothing gives clues to the path to the future. The child must be dressed in clothes made from new cloth. New clothes are necessary because they portend the future. If the child did not have new clothes now, his apparel would not "wear well" when he worked in the fields in later life. To be clothed was not something to be taken for granted in Laos, and to be beautifully clothed was to fend off many evils. Pang's baby wore new clothes and was also protected by the appropriate string tying party which blesses the infant and convinces his spirits to remain in his body. Pang's baby wears the right shirt.

It is interesting to note that Hmong women carry their babies upright against their backs, held in place by an intricately stitched fabric panel. In Laos the children

were also protected by hats covered with symbolic design. Little girls sometimes wore rooster or dragon hats, and little boys wore hats with an elephant trunk motif. One can ask about the symbolism, but a young Hmong student who had spent some years in American schools said, "The sewing is like Pictionary; you have to figure it out."

You Lor fashioned "kab nyuam dev," small caterpillars one to two inches in length, and sewed them to the boys' caps. The colorful caterpillars constructed from bright scraps of fabric also became a great hit as playful adornment when attached by a tiny gold safety pin to lapels of English teachers or frequenters of craft shows.

You Lor also told a story about the colorful "kab nyuam dev."

> Once a long time ago a woman saw a "kab nyuam dev" eating leaves from a tree. She was extremely fascinated by its beauty and held it to her breast. The "kab nyuam dev" attached itself and fed greedily.
>
> Whatever the woman did, she could not free herself. She brushed at it frantically, but it would not let go. It grew as large and as heavy as a child. The woman became so desperate that she took a knife to cut the "kab nyuam dev," but only succeeded in cutting herself.

The woman wept bitterly. Then she cooked two chickens and set out to return to her parents. When she came to the edge of a vast water, she began to cry again.

"Oh, water, you are very big! I can't see my mother! I can't see my father!"

When the "kab nyuam dev" heard her speak, it opened its mouth and said, "Mom, are we going to see my Grandmother and Grandfather?"

Quickly the woman hit the "kab nyuam dev" when it opened its mouth. The "kab nyuam dev" fell into the water and drowned. Happy again, the woman returned home (Vue, Klevar, Anderson, 1982, p. 1).

Although one might be fooled by the bright colors of the "kab nyuam dev" temporarily, it was not Hmong; it was not pan' dao; it was not a pathfinder, but an outsider. Still, evil spirits might mistake it for something tempting and be satisfied to take it, rather than the child under the hat on which the caterpillar perched. Children can be identified as Hmong by the clothing they wear, but those same children can also be disguised and protected from evil spirits.

Here in the U.S. young Hmong parents are now convinced that they need the ecologically unsound disposable diapers advertised on TV; they are required by law to put their

children in car seats; and they find that by the time children reach school age they want to dress like rock stars, Barbie, Rambo, and Ninja Turtles. The environment around them (school, TV, K-Mart, and Shop-Ko) is having its effect, but not in such a way as to nullify the validity of fetishes at wrist or neck or ankle. Hmong babies get off to a good start; the patterns, the mazes on the baby carriers, support their backs for the first important months, and it may be that they learn Hmong while they sleep. Immediately after they are born, when they are married, and right after they die are the most important times to reckon the course of the journey to the Lord of Heaven.

**Funeral Baggage**

Video cameras scanned the gathering at the funeral home. The daughters-in-law fanned Blia's face and wept. They stroked his head as they would an infant's and spoke lovingly, calling to him. Sometimes the sobbing women sprayed the area with Lysol because the body had not been embalmed, and the day pressed hotly around the mourners. Brown edged blossoms filled a wire frame shaped to resemble a map of Laos. A pink satin ribbon with silver lettering identified the old man's country. Florist's arrangements drooped from formal baskets; Blia had been dead for several days.

A skillful kheng player dipped and twirled, balanced on one foot, twisting low to the floor, all the while piping the plaintive lament which leads the deceased on the right path to the spirit world. Where this instrument and its music exist, there exist Hmong. Hmong believe that without the music to guide them, their souls may get lost on the journey to the Lord of Heaven. This music has been an integral part of their identity, and when it is missing, anxiety is often present in survivors. Kheng music binds the people and defines their spiritual paths. At Blia's funeral one or the other of five musician-priests played almost continuously while he lay in state. A large drum suspended from an eight-foot tripod had also been part of the liturgy.

After each of the sons eulogized their father and wept with abandon, family and friends knelt on the floor in front of the polished oak casket to bow with respect.

The funeral service had been listed for 2:00 p.m. in the La Crosse Tribune but suddenly, at 1:45 in a flurry of activity, the casket was closed by the sons and loaded into the hearse. Mourners jumped into cars which pulled quickly away. One confused ESL teacher who had just arrived wondered how to pay her respects but was urged into the car carrying Decorah sponsors, who valiantly sped after the hearse in order to find the country cemetery. At the

cemetery the casket was re-opened. Blia's sons cut the zipper out of his trousers and the metal buttons from his jacket in order to be in observance of an interdict against burying any metal with the body. Family members stuffed paper and plastic bags filled with both Hmong and American traveling clothes into the foot of the coffin. Some Hmong men would only wear their pan' dao marked shirts on their journey to the ancestors; others still wear them for the New Year Celebration or a wedding.

Much to the undertaker's dismay, seven garbage bags full of spirit-money, grayish and stamped with blocks of red and gold, were burned at the grave side. These bags contained only the "money" donated by one set of relatives. That donated by others had been burned the day before at the funeral home.

You Lor, Blia's widow, grieved intensely; I couldn't help but think of the Hmong parable she had taught me several years before which said, "The sun shines brighter than the moon; the husband loves better than the sons." A few months later she remarried over the objections of her children, but she continued to grieve for Blia. So did their daughter-in-law. Mai Yia sewed a piece of clothing to be placed on Blia's grave. He had been buried several months before. She said she would put it on the grave, and he would come for it. She also asked, "Can people do two,

Hmong and God? Some people say you cannot do two, but I belong to St. Paul Lutheran." She could not give up Hmong tradition, but found security in the Christian church in America. Mai Yia wanted to have both.

One of the problems which interferes with a feeling of security for the Hmong as they anticipate death is the problem of obtaining a burial plot. In the midwest many cemeteries are owned by churches whose members want to save the space for themselves, not for outsiders. Public cemeteries exist, but they often do not please Hmong mourners who believe that graves must be located according to geomancy, the study of the configuration of the rivers and the mountains. At this point the spiritual needs of the Hmong are colliding head on with the local environment. Hmong are shopping around for cemetery plots for the elderly, but being rebuffed. At a juncture like this anthropologists, both materialist and idealists, might be focused to study and help solve this problem.

## PART III WEARING THE RIGHT SHIRT--THE WORD

### No Time to Write

> The reward of these inquirers will be a more rational comprehension of the faiths in whose midst they dwell, for no more can he who understands but one religion understand even that religion, than the man who knows but one language can understand that language (Tylor, (1958) p. 5).

By the time all of the Hmong left Decorah and were no longer my students, I had become their student. I began to commute to "Hmong University," usually in La Crosse, Wisconsin. There I was fed generously on Hmong stories; experiential learning; and green papaya shredded with peanuts, carrots, lemon juice, garlic, and hot pepper; egg rolls; steamed dumplings stuffed with hamburger, hard boiled eggs, cilantro, and onions; steaming noodle soup; and a dessert made of pink agar-agar, tapioca pearls, sweet basil seeds, coconut milk, sugar syrup, and chipped ice. I was served hot coffee, warm pop, and delicious soya milk and papaya drink. Hmong friends treated me with a great measure of kindness and friendship.

I felt comfortable in Hmong homes; I enjoyed Hmong companionship. Internalizing an understanding of Hmong culture, however, is a long slow process. Thomas Kuhn (1974) explains: "What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see. In the absence of such training there can only be, in William James's phrase, 'a bloomin' buzzin' confusion.'"

Hmong exodus from Decorah, in fact, put me into quite a confusion, and I cursed the day I had pointed out to Hmong friends a sign declaring La Crosse, Wisconsin, "the best city for its size in the U.S.A." Only later did I understand more accurately the psychology of secondary migration and of the empty-nest syndrome and also realize that what I said had little to do with their choice of La Crosse. Instead, it was the configuration of the river and the mountains that drew them; geomancy instructed the Hmong, not I.

When Tou Me Xiong and Lia Vang moved with their children to an unsafe looking house on Ferry Street near the big river and piles of dirty coal, I grieved. I was only marginally comforted by the fact that some of the Vangs, who had also moved to La Crosse from Decorah, occupied a house nearby which, for some unknown reason, had been signed by its painter. The porch read, "Mississippi River House by

Waters." Se and TeLy's house also belonged to the river; it could be recognized by the port hole up under the eaves. The Hmong population in La Crosse grew to about 2,000. Decorah Hmong had been the seed bed for this new Hmong community.

I visited Shoua Cheng Vue and Pa Lee often when they lived on Eighth Street South, on Caledonia Street, and on Market Street. When they lived in Decorah, I had the honor of naming one of their daughters. Several times Shoua Cheng told me a story about Hmong language and brought me back to the importance of the shirt. Even though the Hmong spoke often about homesickness--homesickness for Decorah, homesickness for Laos, homesickness for Mt. Phu Bia--more important than "home" was the path one walked and who one followed on that path.

A long time ago, the Hmong had a written language, but they lost it.

When the Hmong lived in China, high in the mountains, the Chinese soldiers came to fight them. There were not many Hmong so they fought and ran and fought and ran. Sometimes they hid in the caves. The fighting continued for many years. The men often left the women and children to go fight.

Finally after a long, long time, the men told the women, "We have no time to study our language; we have

> no time to write. We fight and run and hide. Sew our language on our shirts, and we will wear it on our backs. We will learn our language while we sleep."
>
> The women sewed the language on the collars, and the Hmong wore the sewing on their backs. The Green Hmong wore the stitching on the side of the collar against the back so no one could see the beautiful stitching or read the language. Even though the women worked very hard sewing, the written language was soon forgotten. The women, however, continued to sew the patterns on the shirts (Shoua Cheng Vue, personal interview, 1990).

The Hmong evolved a movable physical symbol as the Jews had their Ark; Hmong women stitched signs, marks, beauty, paths for protection from spirits on the collars of the shirts worn daily by everyone in their families. When the planting cycle or political conflict forced them to move, they carried their "church" on their backs. Hmong, like numbers of other peoples (some of whom professed that "the Word was God") associated language with the spiritual; language, stitched designs, and the way to the ancestors became one--through "pan' dao."

Paths to the ancestors received a challenge, however, from missionaries who traveled to Hmong villages in Laos.

Tong Xay Xiong spoke candidly regarding the invitation and confrontation faced by his family in regard to religion.

**Baptists in Laos**

"I tell you true. I am 41 years old; no, I will be 41 years old September 10. My grandfather was the leader of many Hmong villages. When I was young, American Baptists came to my village (about 20 to 30 families) and for sure 90% were converted, all except my grandfather and my father and uncle. Every night the young people would go to sing Bible songs. I can still remember the words from some of those songs. There was even a church built in that village.

"When I was older and went away to school in Vientiane, I lived in a Catholic church; it was a very large building. I studied the Bible there, too; I went along with it, but I promised my father I would not forget him or traditional ways.

"When I came to Chicago, my family was sponsored by Travel Aid. They found us a house to live, but they don't care about taking us to church. When we move to Decorah, all my family (about 26 people) was baptized there, except me. I held my children up for baptism. You remember that. After they moved, now my brothers and their families have all returned to the traditional ways.

"None of them are going to the church any more, only my daughters. It's OK for women to be Christian. They don't

have to go back many generation to take care of their families.

"My wife and I like to listen to the old songs from Laos on the tape, but my children laugh and think they are boring. They watch TV and play it very loud. I think Michael Jackson is boring.

"At home the children speak mostly English now. They say it's easier, and there are many things for which there is no Hmong word. Also, when my wife and I speak Hmong, the children often don't understand.

"I do not have more children because I want all my children to have a good education, if they want it. I thought I could not support more. You should send the children wherever they can get the good education.

"In St. Paul they had a meeting between the elders and the young people who receive high education. The two groups try to come to understanding between the traditional ways and the new ways. They have a meeting like that in California, too, but nothing . . . .

"When the children are young you can keep them under your control, but when they are over eighteen, what can you do? They go to school and they know more than you. But they don't know what to do when the people die or marry" (Tong Xay Xiong, personal interview, 1990).

How will the new generation of Hmong bind clan to clan if they don't know the old ways? How will the young send their parents on the right path to the ancestors? Is religion the primary identifier of Hmong? Hmong say not, but that may depend on how religion is defined. In some Christian faiths it is said that one's whole way of life is worship. It may be instructive to note how three Hmong young women lead their lives--Hmong lives--in the sponsor's church.

**Confirmand's Eve**

We entered the Indochinese Grocery Store to greet friends and obtain the address of a mutual acquaintance, a Hmong woman, a shaman who had lived for awhile in Decorah. They tried to call our friend for us, but she wasn't home. In the meantime we discovered that this was the "last night that Se would 'sing' at the church." Since we had responded to Se's mother's request for Godparents for her second daughter ten years ago, and remembered her fondly over the years, we were interested in this development in Se's life. Her mother put me on the phone to Se who said she would be "confirmed" (give testimony to her Christian faith) in an hour. If we needed to go shopping that was OK, but if we wanted to go to the church that would be nice, too.

In the meantime, the manager of the store, Se's uncle, had been discussing with my husband the possibilities of

convincing a produce operation in Decorah to supply his store with clean chicken feet. Right now he was able to purchase them for about $32 a hundred pounds, however, he would pay a little more than that if he could get them in Decorah. The Hmong here lead busy lives and make careful plans for their progress, and to us it didn't seem unusual that we be swept up in some portion of their lives. Fifteen minutes in the little street level shop was enough to change our evening's plans completely.

An hour later we were sitting in the basement social hall of Our Saviors's Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin, where we had visited several times at the invitation of Hmong members who had been transferred from Decorah churches after their moves from Iowa. Seventeen young people were to confess their faith "in their own words and ways" preliminary to a more formal confirmation the coming Sunday. According to the program, this experience, "prayerfully," will be "strengthening" for all. All of the young people had completed projects to present to an audience of about 80 people: parents, grandparents, sponsors, and friends.

One poised young man played a trumpet solo, "A Joyful Noise"; two handsome, blond teenagers put together slide shows, "Pictures of God's Creation" and "Easter Communion at Our Savior's"; a step-brother and step-sister performed amidst flash bulbs, he, "The Confirmation Rap" and she,

"Honoring My Father and Step Mother." Calligraphy, posters, and reports followed, including those of three young Hmong women.

No Hmong parents were at this Confimands' Eve gathering, no Hmong grandparents, no Hmong brothers and sisters. The three, whom I had known since before they went to kindergarten, were giggly and nervous, but full of smiles and prepared to speak. Se said that there are many stories of creation, but that no one story is right. She wanted to tell her two favorites--the one from the Bible and a Hmong creation story. This she did charmingly and with accent-free English. Bo Houa compared the Bible story of the flood with the Hmong flood story. She said that she did so in order that others would know more about the Hmong and "recognize us as human beings." Hli spoke about her baptism in Thailand by a Hmong pastor. She concluded by saying, "I had sponsors, too, but they were killed in the war."

Each of the confirmands had been applauded enthusiastically; each sat down in relief; each was given a decorative cross. All of the Hmong names were mispronounced. Four or five adults approached Se, Bo Houa, and Hli to congratulate them. We ate pieces from a large, brightly-decorated cake contributed by Aid Association for Lutherans. Confirmands' Eve was a time of heightened emotions and great relief for many of the participants. The

Hmong girls did not share Confirmand's Eve with their families.

Sorting out the meaning of a Confirmand's Eve for the Hmong young people is complicated. First, no Hmong boys were present. It is boys who must honor the ancestors. The girls go to another clan when they are married; for them to go to another faith would not have much effect on the family altar. Second, the Hmong girls had a message to deliver which said that they were proud of who they are and that they would like respect and understanding for their people. Third, by following the prescribed educational progression of the church which had recruited them enthusiastically, they maintained their membership and any support or benefit that might be derived from it. Fourth, the parents did not recognize the evening as a significant rite of passage. Although they were accepting of the girls' involvement, they excluded themselves. Finally, the Hmong girls loved and admired some of the people who had helped them when they first arrived in La Crosse and wanted to maintain those friendships.

**Sponsors and Their Rites of Passage**

Doua drove sixty miles with his wife Bo and their four sons to arrive at their sponsor's 75th Birthday Party toting a large aluminum roaster full of stir fried rice, aromatic

with cilantro. This gift took its place amidst potato salad, ham sandwiches, dill pickles, and marble cake.

Ten years before, when Doua and Bo reached Decorah for the first time, they were only sixteen and fourteen. Although their marriage had been carefully negotiated by their families and both generations were happy with the new alliance, they were not married in Thailand because then immigration regulations would have prevented them from staying in a resettlement unit with their parents. Fear for the safety of the vulnerable young couple and the tradition that newlyweds remain with a young man's family prompted Doua's parents to list Bo as a niece during camp interviews.

Now in Decorah Doua and Bo faced another problem. Iowa law prevented the marriage of children under 16 without the consent of parents and the ruling of a judge; therefore, the sponsor marched off to the court to plead their case. Then she planned the wedding. Within a few weeks they were officially married in the big Decorah Lutheran Church. The bride, her sister-in-law (who was matron of honor), and this tall, long nosed, ESL teacher, recruited by the bride-to-be, marched down the aisle wearing colorful, pleated Green-Hmong skirts, purple turbans, yards of hot pink and green sashes and musical, silver necklaces and tinkling, coin-decorated belts. Aside from the clothing, the celebration was typical of a small-town, mid-west wedding--vows and cake and gifts

and rice throwing. Ten years and four children later, Doua and Bo returned to Decorah to honor their original sponsor.

During the 75th Birthday Party, Doua, his family, and I sat at a round table in the basement of the church where he had been married and talked. I asked him about Hmong religion, and he instructed me not to confuse marriage customs or herbal healing with religion. Spirit calling, on the other hand, he identified as part of the religion topic. I commented on the beauty of his father's altar which I had observed while visiting his family earlier that year. Strings fastened to the wall and ceiling and leading from the front door led benevolent spirits to that special place built for them.

Doua's father had died of cancer about eight months ago. Doua said he still dreams of him often. His mother remarried against Doua's wishes, and now he feels considerable stress as he tries to solve problems in an extended family.

When I asked Doua if it was true that Hmong people believed in a life after death, he replied with certainty that they did, but when I asked if him if the Hmong believed that the good were separated from the evil after death, he responded with an incredulous "No!" and then a thoughtful "I don't think so."

Doua invited me to come to La Crosse and ask him questions about Hmong religion when we had more time and to be sure to ask older people who would know more about the subject. He said that Hmong who had no elderly to advise them were, in some cases, becoming Christian, while those who had a chance to learn traditional ways were sticking with them.

Doua smiled warmly and handsomely as he prepared to leave. I couldn't help but recall that when he first arrived, he didn't smile at all and had two full sets of teeth; extractions and braces changed more than appearances. Doua had obtained a degree in Public Relations from the University of Wisconsin, but now needed a job worthy of his family status and education.

Hmong do not resist all change; it's not necessary. Education is important to them. They can consciously choose to wear the right shirt even when it is somewhat adapted or inconvenient in the face of new jobs and material acquisitions. They believe this, and it will be only after many more years of experience that we will really know what has the greatest influence on them--environment or the spiritual paths known by the elders.

**The New House**

We visited Kha Ying and her family in St. Paul. My son Eric, one of two children who never wanted to share their

parents with anyone, was astounded when I told him Kha Ying and her husband had ten children. After our visit he observed how beautiful the daughters were and how polite the sons. Then he commented, "But where were the rest of them? You said there were ten children." I promised that he had seen them all. Why didn't ten seem like so many when we knew them? Maybe it's not many if they all "belong." Space seemed plentiful in that house; they had plenty of "room." (Tuan, 1977, p. 51)

Kha Ying cooked for us, and she and her son sat across from us to eat and to talk. White strings were tied around Vang's wrist because he had just graduated from high school and his family honored him at a party.

I asked Kha Ying if she would explain to Eric the altar, "dab xwm kab," on the wall near the table. It held spirit money which they purchased at a Hmong store, and chicken feathers were stuck to the paper with blood. This, she said, was hung on the wall to ensure them of riches.

Regarding the relative merits of Christianity and Hmong religion, Kha Ying said, "If you don't believe, it won't do you any good. If you don't believe in the church . . . . If you don't believe in the Hmong way. We will try to stick with the Hmong way a couple more years."

When I asked Kha Ying about the Hmong way of burial, her son looked at her curiously. She said that the oldest

aunt, the father's sister, had important duties at the funeral. The appropriateness of the arrangements was significant to the aunt because otherwise the spirit of the deceased might come back to give her problems. I asked her why the spirit might bother the aunt more than any others, but she said she didn't know. Her son was very interested in this discussion, but Kha Ying did not explain further. Vang wasn't married yet.

According to the Hmong, the right time to teach the accepted beliefs and principles of Hmong life is after marriage. In the past Hmong married young. If the age of marriage goes up, will the appropriateness of the instruction be too late in the lives of the new adults? Will environment outwit dogma? Will education and possessions crowd out traditional faith and law?

**Christian Shaman**

On March 10, 1990, Be Moua came to our house for pizza. Be came to the U.S. (Minnesota) in 1979 when he was nine or ten years old. He spoke about how difficult it was to begin learning the "ABC's" over again. In junior high he was very "wild" and in many fights not initiated by him, but in defense of younger Hmong children who were bullied by the native born. After several years of bloodied noses and fat lips, Be's father said he should go to the Catholic school.

There he was treated well, played football, wrestled, and improved his studies.

Be is a Lutheran; consequently he was not required to take the Family Life course at school, but asked to be allowed to do so anyway. He learned that if you are Catholic you should marry only someone who is also of the Catholic faith.

In the fall of 1986, Be registered as a freshman at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.

Be was learning from his grandfather to play the kheng, the six pipe musical instrument which calls spirits and helps them follow paths to the ancestors. Be thought it would be very difficult, but his grandfather told him it was easy. He was directed to "listen to the song and then play the sound of each important word." Be said it is best to know the songs well first. He said that the musician is not important, but the instrument and the sound are very significant. He said that the Kheng is used after a death (it may be heard also at times for love chants and "separation from country" songs); its sound leads the soul of the person who died on the path in the afterlife.

Be is married and has a nine month old son. His wife and son live with his parents in the Twin Cities. It was after his marriage that his father said he must learn the Hmong ways: it was time for him to start going to the

funerals and paying attention to what was going on. His father began to explain Hmong culture to him.

Be's mother is a shaman. She is a Christian who was baptized as a child in Laos. Her father is a Hmong Christian pastor. He was very angry when she became a shaman, but while she was in a trance the words that came from her mouth said that her father was a shaman, too. He realized that he had the call and that one could be both Christian and shaman.

Shaman are chosen from birth, but sometimes don't know it. Often they become ill; then another shaman will tell them that they must be a shaman, too, and will teach them what they must know.

Be's mother says that when she puts the red cloth over her face she sees a long path and the spirits both good and evil. Spirits speak to her, and in her trance she chants in a language which she refers to as "The Language of Lighting." Most people who are listening can't understand her, but her husband understands and translates for her. She has healed many people.

Some of the Hmong Christians said that the shaman were "sinners." Be's mother felt very bad about that and stopped going to church. When the pastor realized her dilemma, he told her that she had a "gift" and that she was obliged to use it. She could be a Christian and a shaman, too.

According to Be, his mother is liked by all the people she meets: Koreans, blacks, whites, Hispanics, nearly everyone.

When individuals leave the core of their culture by becoming part of two cultures and wander in those boundary areas, they occasionally become the leaders and the most respected among their acquaintanceship, but certainly this is not easy when grappling with the major questions of life. Some Hmong who were introduced to Christianity in Laos have known this kind of sojourn intimately, and others will face it here in the U.S. Walking with one foot in each culture is a challenge to many Hmong, especially one who serves as a lay minister in the Christian church.

**La Crosse Lay Minister**

"The families that do not have elders are leaving the traditional culture to become Christian more often than the families with many old people.

"Some Hmong keep the traditional beliefs. Some have become Christian and don't do most of the old ways. Some Hmong have lost the traditional beliefs because they have no one to teach them or they don't listen, and they are not Christian either; they don't believe anything [They have no religious beliefs].

"I don't tie the strings anymore. If I'm invited to a party and people are tying strings, I just put a dollar on the plate and then put the string there, too. If you tie

the string, you must say a blessing. If you just say long life, good health, or something like that, I guess it's O.K., but really only God can bless; if you say that the person should never die, that's wrong.

"I don't kill the animal to use for sacrifice either. The animal has a right to live, too. Some of the people are getting away from sacrifice because in the big cities it's illegal to kill the animal. Also, in the winter it's very difficult to go to the country to kill the animal; the smell is very bad, too. If you are a Christian, you don't need the animal to sacrifice because you have Jesus; he is the sacrifice.

"When I was in Laos and Thailand, I just ran around. I was too young to learn the traditional Hmong ways. When I got to La Crosse no one taught me the Hmong ways either. Then I started working for the Hmong Association, which had its office at the church. I saw many, many people come to fill the church, so I said, 'Let's go see what they are doing.' Then I talked to Pastor Rice; he began to teach me.

"About shaman--is quite a problem. Some shaman tell me they call on God before they do anything. They say Vajtswv [Christian Hmong word for God: king and creator] is over all things. But some just laugh and say they never call on any one. About shaman I don't know what is good.

"It's important to preserve Hmong culture, but only the good and happy part. The clans are not used for power and political now but only for marriages. We don't marry anyone with the same clan name even if we never knew them or their family before. I think it's important to keep the clans for that reason.

"I don't know any theology, but I told the pastor that if I am going to stay and minister to Hmong people, I need to study more and learn theology" (Chia Lee, personal interview, 1990).

The Hmong have long studied the supernatural and have their own theology, but as human nature dictates, they, like most people, are concerned about how theology might make things better for them here on earth as well as at some final destination. Shoua Cheng Vue thinks of theology as an umbrella under which to shelter his family, but which umbrella is now his?

**Two Umbrellas**

I asked Shoua Cheng Vue how the Hmong were reacting to exposure to Christian beliefs. Were they choosing between Hmong and Christian ways? He had given this a lot of thought and spoke about his ideas concerning the confrontation of two cultures.

"Hmong Christians have many relatives in the group of Hmong which is not Christian; Hmong who are not Christian

have many friends who are becoming Christian. This division causes trouble between the two groups--between members of the same family. When the Hmong first came, they had no family to tell them what to do when people died, so they turned the arrangements over to the church that sponsored them. Later families were not sponsored by churches but were sponsored by other Hmong. Then the Hmong traditions were used again. I do not think that you can walk between the two ways, or you will get lost. [His wife nodded agreement.]

"A person from our church (Lutheran) died recently, and we decided to do both Hmong and Christian ways. We did the Hmong tradition at the funeral parlor and the Christian service at the church. I don't know if that is good or not. In the Hmong tradition it is always the father's sister who says what the funeral will be. She is still the one who determines the arrangements here.

"To tell the truth, I don't believe any [religion]. Well, maybe a little. [He pointed with his thumb to about one-half inch of his little finger in the appropriate Hmong way to show measurement of something small.] If you are going to die, and if you and many go to pray all night in the church, you will still die when your time has come. And if you decide to call a shaman, and if he prays for you all

night long, you will still die when it is the right time for you to die. Neither one will make any difference.

"But in this world, if you can find just a little umbrella to put over your family, you better stay under it and not move. [At least through religion you will have some protection from the trials of life.] I think that if the person is just sick that the traditions [Hmong and Christian] can help a little because they make the person feel better inside. [Shoua Cheng placed his hand on his chest.]

"We have been here for twelve years now; things are not what we expected. We will not get our country back. We must get a good education for our children, but that is very difficult. In LaCrosse my daughter is in a class of 15 children. Fourteen of them are Hmong. The children speak Hmong all the time. I would like to move my family back to Decorah, but it is hard to find a job to support a big family there" (Shoua Cheng Vue, personal interview, 1990).

Shoua Cheng's daughters invited me to a Hmong Easter Service. The invitation said, "The Hmong Ministry Committee of Our Savior's Lutheran Church would like to invite you and your family and friends to an Easter Service at Our Savior's Lutheran Church, 612 Division Street, La Crosse, Wisconsin, on Sunday, April 15, 1990, starting at 1:00 p.m. The worship service will include Holy Communion,

singing, preaching and dancing. We will have soft drinks and cookies after the Service." The popular American saying, "You are what you eat," could be discussed in regard to Hmong at another time.

## PART IV MARKING PLACE

### Geomancy

Decorah was sometimes referred to by the Hmong resettled there as "a good place--no children have died." This is by comparison to a refugee camp in Thailand (1975) where all the children two and under succumbed to dysentery. However, according to Hmong elders, Decorah is such a "good place" based on its physical location in relationship to the mountains (hills and limestone bluffs) and the river which formed the valley in which it rests.

Geomancy, a system of divination, is used by the Hmong to locate favorable sites for villages and burial places "by reference to the forms of the earth" (Tapp, 1986, p. 87). On several occasions Hmong men, both those who lived in Decorah and those who came to visit, indicated to me, by gesturing with their hands and arms, the cradling of the river by the "mountains." They described the shape taken by the Upper Iowa River, its bluffs, and surrounding hills. They repeated that Decorah is a "good" place, a fertile place in the earth and in its people. (See Table 3--Hmong Births in the Winneshiek County Memorial Hospital).

Geomancy is a paradox because it connects people to place, but also transcends place. It imbues place with

spirituality, is a guide or map for life's journeys, and creates boundaries for what is "good" and appropriate along the way. Geomancy especially guides families during times of grief and separation in death.

Mee Vue, who died of something American doctors could not name or treat, was the only Hmong to die in Decorah between 1976 and 1990. Her family believed that in Laos Communists poisoned the salt given to the Hmong who had been near starvation. Pao told her story in hopes it would help other Hmong.

> I am Mee's brother. I believe that her problems must be caused by poison. I would like to say to all American doctors, please help . . . .
>
> (Waterloo Courier October 23, 1980)

When Mee died, her family not only grieved, but also feared that doctors or undertakers might perform autopsy, embalming, or cremation. They chose a coffin, but removed the metal staples that held the satin lining since metal "does not putrefy, [it] prevents the decay which must take place if effective reincarnation is to occur" (Tapp 1986, p. 92). Sponsors listened to Mee's family and "translated" information for doctors, funeral directors, and pastors.

While walking through the cemetery, Hmong elders searched the configuration of surrounding hills using the ancient art of geomancy to divine the appropriate burial

place, a place that pointed "home," through Chicago, Thailand, Laos, China, and Mongolia to the ancestors in the sky: the places intoned over her grave by her brother. Their eyes did not focus on the shrubs and plantings in the cemetery, the curve of the road, the monuments, but instead on a single golden yellow tree, bright among the reds and rust of fall maple and oak on the bluff across the Upper Iowa River. Nicholas Tapp (1986) further explains geomancy:

> While most of the imagery and directions for the selection of a site assume the presence of a mountainous landscape, feng-shui is practiced in many nonmountainous areas, where trees, rocks and other natural phenomena must suffice to symbolize the great mountains and watercourses which the system properly demands (p. 87).

According to Mee's family, her body should lie with her feet pointing about ten degrees to the left of the "straight" plots surveyed by the cemetery board, toward the golden tree, the most auspicious place on the bluff. The cemetery rules could not be changed. Sponsors suggested that a pole be used to shove the foot of the casket to the left within the standard grave and the head of the casket to the right, permitting the feet to point in the appropriate direction. After the casket was lowered into the ground, this was done.

On one occasion, geomancy was used to confirm the fact that I indeed lived in a favorable rural Decorah location. A Hmong woman who had lived in Decorah returned to visit with her elderly father, newly arrived from Thailand. She was disturbed that I would leave my house and not lock the door. Her father, who did not speak English, was apprised of the situation, stepped outdoors, surveyed the surrounding landscape with his knowledgeable eyes, and reported through translation that this was a safe place, and I was correct in not worrying.

Although Hmong left their own homes in the mountains of Laos, grieved, and claimed "homesick" as one of their first words in English, they also have the capacity within their culture to convert to, or claim as their own, well chosen locations here in the States by using geomancy or by marking them. Some of the young Decorah Hmong men return seasonally to a privately owned Glenwood Township farm near Decorah. Because this farm is in the Federal Set-Aside Program and relatively undisturbed, they can hunt squirrel, camp, and sleep in the one-room shanty in a freedom reminiscent of Laos. On one occasion they marked the cabin with hot pepper and lemon grass in the outside east window sill and used a toothpick to bridge the tiny gap between the two window frames. They marked the west window on the inside sill with

incense sticks and a bullet. They left a sack of sticky rice and a jug of water.

Hmong also enjoy fishing at the Lower Dam. On occasion they mark their trail by placing a large sharp knife across the steep narrow path with the blade facing away from the Hmong fishing group to guard against any evil which might come that way.

Sometimes Hmong mark for spirits the doors and windows of their homes. It is possible to find Hmong friends when they have moved by observing feathers or paper spirit money on doorways. One can at least recognize the residence as Hmong.

**Marked in Decorah**

Many Decorah residents would feel comfortable asking new acquaintances what church they belonged to within the first fifteen minutes of a conversation. More unusual in their minds would be for someone to answer that they had no church or did not intend to affiliate themselves with one. The churches in the community are becoming very ecumenical, however: the Lutherans invite the Catholics for a St. Patrick's Day party; community wide support exists for the Ulster project, which brings Catholic and Protestant children from Ireland; and all the churches participate in and profit from the Nordic Fest the last full weekend in July. The secular and the church often mix. Some of the

clergy belong to the county clubs and almost all of the country club members belong to churches. Consequently, it did not seem a bit strange to refugee sponsors in Decorah to have Hmong refugees come to the area predominately through Lutheran World Relief, Catholic Charities, or Church World Relief. When some families arrived through Iowa Refugee Services, they also were placed within church groups. (Iowa was the only state in the U.S. acting as a voluntary resettlement agency.) Decorah church members may have been willing to believe that some refugees were not Christian, but they also believed that refugees would certainly want to convert when such a propitious opportunity arose.

As the Marthas and the Marys rushed around finding food, clothing, shelter, furniture, and jobs for new arrivals, they also found time to hustle the Decorah Hmong to church services, advised families to sit in front so they would get acquainted, held hymn books for people who could not read, and after services hurried them to "coffee hour" even though most of the Hmong had not acquired a taste for coffee or sweets upon arrival in this "Norwegian" community. The Decorah Hmong did in fact become acquainted; they stitched wall hangings as gifts for the church, gave clerical stoles to the clergy and sent their children to Sunday school. Eighty-three Hmong were baptized in Decorah churches (See Table 4).

Before Mai Yia's baptism she was encouraged to wear her traditional Hmong clothing by her sponsor, but when the Pastor asked her to take off her "hat", yards of royal purple silk wrapped painstakingly around her head, to receive the water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, she refused. A few drops of water placed on her forehead had to suffice.

## PART V CONCLUSION

As path-finders the Hmong sometimes follow U.S. highway maps and other literate ways; sometimes, instead, they rely on memory, like the time Mai Yang directed me to her cousin's home 150 miles away without knowing the address or the names of any of the highways or streets and after having been there only once before. Other memories are generations old, and only an elder or a shaman who can call on the appropriate spirits, can follow them. The Hmong will draw on many skills and memories to guide them in the United States.

Hmong arrived in the U.S. in a state of emergency and have created through cooperative effort their own communication and support system in order to retain and strengthen Hmong identity. They have worked with the U.S. government to bring their people together at Hmong Language Conferences and at Hmong Leadership Conferences, and every city where Hmong reside hosts a "New Year" celebration where Hmong gather for courtship, games, and clan business. Hmong interact with Americans, establishing voice to socially construct a viable culture in the U.S. while anticipating a return to Laos, a return more desirable in the eyes of the men than in the eyes of the women and children. Hmong find

it necessary to be concerned with the economy and the environment of their new home; they struggle for self-sufficiency in order to retain their integrity and traditional world view. According to Fredrick Barth (1969), living surrounded by and trafficking with another culture "does not lead to . . . liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence" (p. 10). The changes that do take place are often the material changes rather than the mental changes.

Wherever they live, the Hmong use their own set of mental strategies to actively seek solutions to their problems. They observe carefully and learn what "works" in the mainstream society, but they also remember what has succeeded for generations during their movement out of China into Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Since arriving here in the United States, they have actively sought control over their ongoing refugee experience through mutual aid associations; entrepreneurial ventures like food stores, garden projects, and sale of crafts; Christian congregations; and traditional religious organizations; plus the maintenance of clan structure. Fredrick Barth points out that ethnic boundaries can be maintained by "a limited set of cultural features" (p. 38). The primary cultural feature which will help Hmong maintain their ethnic

integrity is the cultural habit of wearing the right shirt and walking with other people who also wear that shirt. Although this behavior story may be played out in numerous variations and diverse interpretations, although some individuals may disappear into the mainstream American culture, most Hmong will remain Hmong; they will not assimilate.

Hmong have the stability of core ethnicity and the flexibility of labyrinth constructors who find it possible to adjust to day-to-day changes in environment whether they be in swidden farming country of Southeast Asia or in technological U.S.A. They pay close attention to both heavenly and earthly paths. Along the way they are guided by shaman; elders; new, young leadership in the U.S., literate and English speaking; and, temporarily, by a few privileged outsiders.

The Hmong individual will concentrate different aspects of his or her persona for problem solving dependent on the type of problem he faces and the societal makeup of the group he occupies at a given time. Even during the generations the Hmong spent in China, they lived in conjunction with other groups of people where they experienced a degree of cultural heterogeneity. Because they have adapted many times before, they have a resiliency which also makes it possible for them to return

to their ethnic identity after association with other societies.

Since the Hmong are path makers, designers and followers of labyrinths, and are psychologically and intellectually prepared to mark and follow paths in the contemporary world, they may be better able than most to survive with, or in spite of, technology. This idealist approach to understanding of the Hmong should not rule out the great need for studying the objective conditions under which they live. An environment must have an impact. Predictions of this impact could be useful to the Hmong in the same way that chainsaws and aluminum cooking utensils are useful.

Hmong live crosscultural exchange, which presupposes heterogeneity, but they maintain a strong consciousness regarding insiders and outsiders in relationship to the ethnic core. They exist within the tension and conflict of cultural diversity, while struggling to maintain their oral tradition in a literate society.

A letter received by a sponsor in August of 1983 suggests two of the major problems faced by the Hmong in the United States: they are a minority often at odds with an ethnocentric majority, and they do not want to be assimilated by that majority.

> I've been thinking about many things, but the best of all is my friend[s] in Decorah, And also I still have a feeling too, because most of the people in Decorah doesn't like Hmong, so even if we [were] in Decorah it wouldn't be any good for us. We need to controlled our-self before something is going to happen to us. And I know, you know [this] better and more than I do (Personal correspondence, 1983).

In spite of racism, in spite of pressure to conform, the Hmong will thrive. They are not unlike the plants treasured by members of the Seed Savers Exchange located in Decorah, who save heirloom fruits and vegetables by growing them, banking the seeds, and dispersing them to the world. One of the members who had received Lia Vang's onions as a gift planted them and took them to the Seed Saver's potluck picnic. To his surprise, a world's onion expert needing a plant which would grow bountifully in Hawaii recognized this "onion" as a French shallot. It had probably been taken from France to Southeast Asia over a century ago, adjusted to the tropical climate there, and survived the transplant to America with Hmong refugees. It must be a hardy plant and used to the tropics. Consequently, this Hmong onion may serve Hawaii well (Schwarz, 1991, unpublished paper). Hmong refugees, like the onions they carried with them, can flourish.

## EPILOGUE

Coming to understand Hmong culture is like having one's eyes adjust to a tiger hidden in the bamboo: the tiger exists, but as the grass waves or the tiger moves, one's eyes see only fleetingly. Like an optical illusion the tiger disappears. The tiger breathes, waves its tail, and like a spirit vanishes. Comprehensive knowledge of the Hmong culture is elusive, especially since that culture is continually changing.

To repeat Thomas Kuhn (1974), he explains in another way why it is so difficult to know the Hmong or any people of a culture different from our mother culture: "What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see" (p. 56). Consequently, we sponsors and teachers were not (could not be) ready under the emergency status of refugee resettlement to "know" Hmong because to do so meant for sponsors to enter or take on a new paradigm (although paradigm is too fixed a word for culture, which cannot be frozen in time).

Probably Tom Dooley did not worry much about paradigms or theories in 1956 when he brought medicine to Hmong in Southeast Asia. Tom Dooley, doctor, philanthropist,

missionary, hero of my youth, but human also, carried out the work that inspired him as best he could. He never believed that he had done enough. Similarly, in Decorah it is sometimes thought that the only lasting concepts taught the Hmong were the concepts of turkey for Thanksgiving and Norwegian krumkaka for profit. Several times I have seen Hmong selling these crumbly cookies at Southeast Asian food fairs; they are still using krumkaka irons long after toasters and other electric appliances have been thrown away. Even so I am proud to have had a hand in Hmong resettlement, and I am always thankful for their hospitality to me.

Now the Hmong children are growing up and some of them are attending college. Stephanie (Pang Nhia) went to Thailand last winter to do research in the hill tribe villages. Maybe she will let me travel with her some time. As evidenced by these studied recollections, one of the problems faced by sponsors who no longer have Hmong families to work with is how to process the lessons of their own intercultural journey and what to do next. A sponsor might take the advice of Jackson (1986, p. 202): "You worry too much about what you can give. It's what you can learn and how you can change that matters. If we can't change ourselves, how can we expect to change the world."

I believe there is something to be learned from other viewpoints than my own, and I advocate a world in which diversity of life is respected. Consequently, I will go to the next Hmong New Year party and be surprised and educated again by Hmong viewpoint and voice. Then I will share the story of my journey--which may include them and the fact that Decorah Hmong seasonally return to Northeast Iowa for recreation, squirrels, watercress, and to see the place where the river and the mountains form "a good place."

# APPENDIX A. TABLES

**Ethnic Groups Served by SEA Refugee Coordination Services**

**1981 Table 1**

| | |
|---|---|
| Hmong | 141 |
| Ethnic Chinese | 28 |
| Cambodian | 30 |
| Tai Dam | 16 |
| Lao | 17 |
| Vietnamese | 64 |

**Southeast Asians Served by SEA Refugee Coordination Services '81 Table 2**

| County | Adults | Children | Over 65 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Winneshiek | 65 | 72 | |
| Clayton | 13 | 16 | 1 |
| Allamakee | 5 | 9 | 1 |
| Howard | 10 | 4 | |
| Fayette | 20 | 23 | |
| Dubuque | 31 | 18 | |
| Delaware | 2 | 4 | |
| Total | 148 | 146 | |

**Hmong Births in the Winneshiek County Memorial Hospital**

**Table 3**

| Year | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| 1977 | 1 | 1 |
| 1978 | 2 | 1 |
| 1979 | 2 | 4 |
| 1980 | 5 | 3 |
| 1981 | 4 | 1 |
| 1982 | 2 | 2 |
| 1983 | 0 | 1 |
| 1984 | 1 | 0 |
| 1986 | 2 | 0 |
| Total | 19 | 13 |

**Hmong Individuals Baptized in Decorah Churches Table 4**

| Year | 76 | 77 | 78 | 79 | 80 | 81 | 82 | 83 | 84 | 85 | 86 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Washington P. | | | | | 3 | 1 | | | | | |
| Decorah Luth. | | | | 4 | 13 | | 4 | 3 | 1 | | |
| First Lutheran | | | 3 | | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | | 1 |
| Good Shepherd | | 14 | 1 | | 16 | 1 | 6 | | | | |
| Methodist | | | | | | | | | | | |
| St. Benedicts | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Hmong Sponsored by Decorah Lutheran Church Table 5**

| Arrival | Family head | Stayed | # on Arrival |
|---|---|---|---|
| May 81 | Tong C. Xiong | 3 yrs. 8 mos. | 6 |
| March 81 | Khoua Xiong | 3 yrs. 10 mos. | 4 |
| August 80 | Kou Peng Xiong | 4 yrs. 5 mos. | 1 |
| March 80 | Neng Xiong | 3 yrs. 7 mos. | 1 |
| January 80 | Tou Xiong | 3 yrs. 9 mos. | 1 |
| January 80 | Bo Yang | 8 mos. | 4 |
| December 79 | Blia Y. Xiong | 3 yrs. 8 mos. | 5 |
| July 79 | Xay Xiong | 2 yrs. 6 mos. | 6 |
| October 78 | Kao Xiong | 2 yrs. 6 mos. | 5 |
| July 78 | Tou Me Xiong | 3 yrs. 4 mos. | 4 |
| June 77 | Meng Vang | 3 mos. | 1 |
| October 76 | Der Vang | 6 mos. | 5 |

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